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**Agricultural Communications
Texas A&M University System
2112 TAMUS
College Station, TX 77843-2112
(979)845-2895 (979)845-2414**

Allergy Attack Prevention Begins at Home

Writer: *Linda Anderson, 979-862-1460, lw-anderson@tamu.edu*

Contacts: *Janie Harris, 979-854-3850, j-harris@tamu.edu*

Lorin V. Catalena, 979-693-6000

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A runny or stuffy nose, watery eyes, sneezing and coughing may signal a cold or the flu or could mean allergies.

If a child has these symptoms, plus dark circles under his eyes or a crease across his nose from constant rubbing or if the symptoms worsen when he's outdoors or around animals, his body might be responding to allergens, said two experts.

Janie Harris, Texas Cooperative Extension housing and environment specialist, and Lorin V. Catalena, certified Physician Assistant with Texas ENT & Allergy team in College Station, have written a booklet on telling the difference. The booklet, "Controlling Allergy Triggers in the Home," is available at Extension's Family and Consumer Sciences Web site at <http://web.archive.org/web/20070907001149/http://fcs.tamu.edu/>. Click on the link to "House and Home."

"An allergen is a substance that the body is exposed to that it regards as an invader", Harris said. "These invaders trigger a chain of events that lead to the body's release of histamine into the bloodstream."

Histamine, which is released by the immune system, causes the watery eyes, scratchy throat and other familiar allergy symptoms, the experts said. Allergic symptoms can be so minimal as to be only a nuisance, or they can be severe.

The tendency to develop allergies can run in families too, they added. If one parent has allergies, the children have as much as a 50 percent chance of developing the same allergies; if both parents are afflicted, the children's chances of developing allergies go to 80 percent.

But children and adults too don't have to suffer from allergies all the time. Relief is possible, in part through environmental changes, Harris said.

Keep in mind, she said, that the cleanest home can still be full of allergy triggers, such as dust mites and insects, mold and mildew, and animal dander.

The experts offered these suggestions:

To control dust mites microscopic creatures similar to spiders start by frequently cleaning carpets and upholstery with a high-efficiency particulate air filter vacuum cleaner. Keep rugs, carpets and upholstered furniture out of the allergy sufferer's bedroom; use allergen-impermeable covers on mattresses, box springs and pillows. Wash stuffed animals in hot water or place them in freezer bags and freeze them overnight. Keep the indoor humidity about 50 percent in summer and 35 percent in winter. Change air conditioner/heater filters every month.

To control mold and mildew, don't let standing water or leaves and other plant debris pile up around the house. Keep standing water out of the house by frequently emptying pans under air conditioners and refrigerators. Use a dehumidifier in the house; in warmer climates, use the air conditioner. After showering, wipe down the wet shower walls and leave the shower door open for increased circulation. Clean up any mold growing indoors; wipe down the area with an anti-mold solution to keep it from coming back. Throw away moldy foods and empty the garbage often.

To control pollen's effects, try to keep allergy-suffers indoors during times of high pollen, especially if they have severe allergies. When mowing the grass or working in the yard, allergy sufferers wear a mask.

To control animal dander, keep pets outside or at least out of bedrooms. Shampoo pets at least once a week.

To control cockroaches, vacuum often and keep the house clean and sanitary. Seal cracks and repair window screens to help eliminate points of entry. Get rid of clutter where the insects might hide, including stacks of magazines or newspapers. If cockroaches do get into the house, kill them with the least toxic method available.

Allergic reactions to insect bites can be deadly in some cases, Harris said. To help prevent them, dress children in light-colored clothing that covers most of the body long-sleeved shirts, long pants and socks and make sure they wear shoes when they are outside. Lotions, perfumes, food and drinks can attract insects. Keep garbage cans clean and covered, and inspect outdoor toys and equipment for insect nests.