**Why dirt might just be good for you**

By Lindsay BrownNewsbeat reporter

[FROM THE TOPICLIFE](http://www.bbc.co.uk/newsbeat/topics/life)

12 Oct 2016

**Share this article**

* [Facebook](javascript:undefined)
* [Twitter](javascript:undefined)
* [Email](javascript:undefined)

Show share tools

**The number of people going to hospital in England with an allergic reaction or anaphylactic shock has**[**gone up by more than a third**](http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-37482798)**in the past five years.**

Figures show there were 29,544 admissions in 2015-16 for allergic reactions - compared to 22,206 admissions in 2011-12.

It's estimated around half of all children have an allergy.

Symptoms can range from the relatively treatable to the more serious - anaphylactic shock.

Some doctors say more people are getting allergies because our homes are... too clean.

This has lowered people's natural resistance to bacteria and dust, which cause common allergies.

**So should we be ditching our bleach and rolling around in mud?**

"Something has clearly changed in the last 50 years," Dr Donald Hodge, who specialises in children's allergies, tells Newsbeat.

"It's not really a question of dirt but the premise of the hygiene hypotheses suggests that childhood exposure to microbial organisms may reduce the future risk of developing allergic disease."

This theory is backed by [**a study carried out in New Zealand**](http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/health-36762624)which claims children who suck their thumb or bite their nails are less likely to develop allergies.

Research suggests children brought up on farms are less likely to have an allergy because they're exposed to farm animals, dirt and pollen from an early age.

[**Allergy UK**](https://www.allergyuk.org/why-is-allergy-increasing/why-is-allergy-increasing) says: "Whilst children living on farms were previously directly exposed to animals, and their environment contained a range of microbial agents and plant derived agents, most of us now live in cities where we have minimal exposure to animals."

Dr Hodge says hygiene is just one possible reason the number of people suffering from allergies is going up, but we shouldn't ditch all our household chemicals just yet.

"There are lots of pathogens out there that need to be avoided, and cleaning products are very good at that."

He says we still need to wash our hands and keep clean to avoid nasty bugs.

"It's important families should take precautions to reduce the chance of exposure to these viruses."

So if hygiene is just one theory, then what else could be behind the rise in allergies?

**The food we eat**

What we eat and how we make food has changed loads over the past 50 years.

We're eating more processed food and less fruit and vegetables.

Some experts say our bodies haven't quite caught up with it, so reject or react to certain foods.

Allergy UK says: "A number of research teams are investigating whether reduced levels of nutrients - in particular vitamin D, omega-3 fatty acids (in fish) or antioxidants - might contribute to the development of allergy."

"While a diet low in oily fish has been associated with increased risk of childhood asthma and allergies in some studies, one study giving extra fish oils to babies did not prevent the occurrence of allergies.

"Vitamin D is important for the immune system and in early lung development."

**Genetics**

If your mum or dad has an allergy, chances are you've probably got one too.

However changes in genes take hundreds of years to develop and so genetics can't account for the current increase in allergies.

"Current research is investigating the effect of the environment in which we live, on genetic factors," according to Allergy UK.

"It is now clear that many genes can be 'turned on or off' by environmental factors.

"For example, viral infections are able to modulate our immune systems by switching certain genes on or off, promoting an allergic tendency in immune cells."

**Pollution**

Like our diets, our environment is very different to how it was 50 years ago.

More of us are living in cities and towns, there's more traffic on our roads and there's a lot more people.

This could be the reason more of us have allergies.

"While there is evidence that pollutants can exacerbate existing airway allergy, the question of whether pollution can cause new allergy remains controversial.

"One hypothesis for which there is accumulating data, is that the increase in allergy mirrors our declining exposure to bacteria and other micro-organisms in our environment."

*Find us on Instagram at***[BBCNewsbeat](http://instagram.com/bbcnewsbeat)***and follow us on Snapchat, search for****bbc\_newsbeat***