# ASTHMA & ALLERGIES

#### *What are the Health and Safety Risks?*

**M**ore than 7 million children in the United States have asthma, a lung disease that makes it difficult for them to breathe. Another 40 to 50 million people have allergies. It may be anything like certain foods, plants, or something in the air. Symptoms include runny nose, watery eyes and sneezing. Allergies can also affect a person’s skin. Symptoms include a rash or itching. Sometimes allergies can actually cause asthma attacks. Prevention is the key for families.

With the right knowledge and assistance, a family member can control their asthma and allergies. A knowledgeable stakeholder or provider could assess, prevent, or reduce doctor visits from family members by identifying changes in the home environment that could positively impact the recurring health issues that may be occurring. There are tools and training to teach about how to guide clients through a home assessment and educate families to learn how to make their home healthier so they will feel better. Family members should always be encouraged to see their health care provider if they believe they have asthma or allergies, where they can then get a diagnosis and proper medical advice.

Asthma Triggers

#### ***Where Do Asthma & Allergy Risks Come From?***

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Lots of things cause asthma attacks and these are called “triggers.” Some people have only one or two triggers while others have many triggers. Some triggers are things that people are allergic to, called “allergens.” An example of a trigger that is also an allergen is pollen from trees and flowers. Other allergens that are triggers come from dogs and cats, cockroaches, mice, mold spores and dust mites. Some of these allergens are very small and they float around in the air in a home. Dust mites are tiny “bugs” that cannot be seen. They live everywhere in carpets, bedding, furniture, and stuffed animals and they are more plentiful when the indoor air is humid.

Other triggers have nothing to do with allergies. Extreme cold or hot weather, exercise, and strong emotions (laughing, crying, fear, and stress) can all trigger an asthma attack. Cigarette smoke is another common asthma trigger. Nitrogen dioxide gas produced by gas stoves, or other irritants, can also be a trigger.

Common Asthma Triggers

* Dust
* Pollution
* Pets
* Smoking
* Pests
* Mold
* Pollen
* Respiratory Infections like colds and flu
* Chemical irritants

##### Allergies

An allergy is an unusual reaction to something that is usually harmless, like a food, a plant, or something in the air. The good news for families is that most allergies can be treated. If a family member has allergies, it’s important for them to find out what causes the problem and possible solutions including medication or reducing exposure to the risks. A health care provider can test a patient to find out what allergens they are sensitive to.

##### Common Allergens

Many of the asthma triggers listed above can also cause allergic reactions for people who don’t have asthma. Some additional common allergens are listed here. A family member should talk to their health care provider if they have a reaction to any of these:

* **Foods:** milk and dairy products; eggs; gluten; citrus fruits like oranges and lemons; artificial colors and flavors; nuts; shellfish like shrimp or clams.
* **Medicines:** penicillin; some heart medicines.
* **Insect stings or bites:** bee stings from yellow jackets, honeybees, wasps, or hornets; bites from fire ants. Sometimes reactions to insects get more serious as a person gets older. Eventually, only one sting could kill someone. A family member should always talk to their health care provider if they have had a serious reaction to a sting or bite.
* **Contact allergens:** when these touch a person’s skin, they could get a rash or another reaction. These include plants like poison ivy and others, cosmetics or personal care products, jewelry, latex, and household chemicals.
* **Inhaled allergens:** when a person breathes these, they could have a reaction. They include cockroaches (their dried shells), dust mites, saliva and dander from cats and dogs, tree or plant pollen, and chemical irritants from cleaning products.



**What can you do to help the families**

**and communities you serve?**

*Actions for Living in a Healthy Home*

Family Health

Stakeholders and providers should assist and encourage families to identify their risks for asthma and allergies and what their triggers are. They can also help provide training and education on home assessment tools and how to integrate them into a holistic approach to health, including a focus on education, assessment, and maintenance tips on Allergens, Pets, Smoking, Mold and Moisture.

##### Housekeeping and Maintenance

##### As part of a holistic approach to reducing asthma triggers and allergies in the home, families should be encouraged to:

* Use zippered mattress covers and pillow covers under sheets and pillowcases and discouraged from using feather or down pillows. They should look for “hypoallergenic” bedding.
* Routinely wash blankets, sheets, pillowcases, and mattress pads in hot water and detergent weekly and use high heat in clothes dryers.
* Change the filter on their furnace and air conditioner at least a couple of times each year. The “MERV” rating on the package for air filters should be at least 8, if allowable by the equipment manufacturer.

##### Pets

##### If the family has pets, they should be advised to:

* Keep furry and feathered pets out of sleeping areas and off of furniture, and keep bedroom doors closed to them.
* Clean pet beds, litter boxes and cages frequently.
* Damp dust with a microfiber cloth and vacuum often, preferably with a HEPA vacuum. This will reduce pet hair and dander, or feathers.

##### Pollen, Pollution and Fragrances

##### Families should be encouraged to:

* Shower or wash hair at night before going to sleep when they have spent time outdoors, and wear clean clothing daily. This is especially important when the pollen count is high.
* Ventilate their home and be sure appliances are vented to the outside. They should use exhaust fans in the kitchen and bathroom and avoid smoke from fireplaces, fire pits and charcoal grills.
* Avoid having air fresheners, incense, scented candles and fresh flowers in their home and use “fragrance free” laundry and cleaning products. Perfume and scented personal care products can trigger allergic reactions.

##### Smoking

##### If a family member smokes and they would like to quit, encourage them to look for help. Many programs can provide help for free. Good resources for smoking cessation help include the American Lung Association hotline at 1-800-LUNG-USA, or the website smokefree.gov. Until the family member has quit, they should be counseled to smoke outside and away from children, as smoke in the air can give other family members, especially children, asthma and other lung diseases.

##### Mold and Moisture

##### In order to avoid substantial mold growth in a home, a family should be coached to:

* Fix all leaks quickly as mold needs water or damp conditions to grow.
* Make sure clothes dryers are vented to the outside.
* Turn on kitchen fans when cooking and use exhaust fans that are vented to the outside or open a window when showering.
* Use a dehumidifier if the humidity in the home is above 50%.