

MEDfacts

An Educational Health Series From National Jewish Health®



Allergies to Cockroaches

Facts About Allergies

The tendency to develop allergies may be inherited. If you have allergic tendencies and are exposed to certain things in your environment (allergens), you may develop allergies to some of those things. Examples of allergy symptoms include itchy eyes, runny nose, asthma symptoms, eczema and rash. The timing of the allergic response may be immediate or delayed. Allergy testing may be recommended to help identify your allergies.

Allergies to Cockroaches

Cockroach allergies are very common. Some researchers believe the incidence is rising. One-third of people with other allergies are sensitive to cockroaches, but so are up to 12 percent of people without any other known allergies.

Cockroach allergies may be dangerous to people with asthma. Exposure may cause severe attacks in over half of those diagnosed. Even if you've never seen a cockroach in your home, the allergen may be present. It is not necessarily a reflection of the cleanliness of your home. Cockroaches live in walls and other places you cannot see or easily clean.

Where Cockroaches Live

Cockroach allergies are most common in southern states, but that's not the only region where they occur. The bugs thrive in moist, humid climates, and abide in cracks, crevices and spaces between walls.

Unclean surfaces and uncovered food can make a home more susceptible to a cockroach infestation. Yet cockroaches can congregate wherever food and warmth are present. This can include restaurants, hospitals, and bakeries as well as upscale urban dwellings.

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Symptoms

Cockroach allergies can cause sneezing, wheezing, itchy eyes, cough and other symptoms common to allergic rhinitis. As in other common allergies, symptoms can range from mild to severe. But cockroach allergies may have especially dangerous health consequences to children.

One study showed that children who were allergic to cockroaches were hospitalized for asthma 3.3 times more often than other children. This included children with allergies to dust mites or cats. Twenty-three to 60 percent of city dwellers with asthma are allergic to cockroaches. Some researchers believe that the rise in cases of asthma among urban children is due to increased contact with cockroach allergens, especially since children play indoors more than they used to. Proteins in cockroach feces, saliva and bodies are thought to be the major culprit in triggering allergic responses.

Environmental Control

Once an allergy has been identified, the next step is to decrease or eliminate exposure to the allergen. This is called environmental control. Evidence shows that allergy and asthma symptoms may improve over time, if the recommended environmental control changes are made. Many of the changes are for the entire home. The bedroom is the most important, because the bedroom is where people usually spend 1/3 to 1/2 of their time.

Steps to Control Cockroach Allergen

- Consult a cockroach control specialist. Let the specialist know there is someone living in the home with asthma if spraying is recommended.
- Use roach traps, poison baits or boric acid. Avoid using poisons around small children and pets.
- Do not leave food or trash out. Empty the garbage every day.

Your health care provider may recommend medications, therapies or other environmental controls. Exposure to cockroaches can make allergy, asthma and/or eczema symptoms worse in some people. To avoid these problems follow the above steps to decrease or eliminate exposure.

Note: This information is provided to you as an educational service of National Jewish Health. It is not meant to be a substitute for consulting with your own physician.

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