

Heating systems cause havoc for asthmatics

(AP) — In the case of asthma and allergy sufferers, the way you heat, decorate and clean your house could help — or play havoc with — your symptoms.

With cooler weather and windtime on the way, people spend more time indoors. If they breathe in dust mites, mold or other allergens, their allergy symptoms can make them miserable.

"That is a big factor," said Dr. Pramila Daftary of the Allergy Clinic of Waco, Texas. "People have trouble, especially asthmatics."

She sees two big troubles this time of year.

With crisp, cool autumn days, many people open their windows or go outside for a breath of fresh air. If they have bad allergies, they will breathe in a lot of

ragweed and pollen this way. Daftary's advice to allergy patients: keep the windows closed. Don't rake leaves or mow lawns. And if you go outdoors, shower and the pollen off your skin and hair when you come back in.

The other worrisome lurking in your heating system — no matter what kind you have. It needs some care before being turned on for the first time this winter.

Daftary advises anyone who has gas heat to check it for small gas leaks.

Those with central heating systems also need to prepare.

"When the cold weather hits and we turn on the heat, if we haven't cleaned the duct, it can blow a lot of dust into the room," Daftary said.

She said people with respiratory problems should never use a

wood-burning fireplace in their home. Its smoke will get in their eyes and nose, worsening their symptoms.

Electric heaters cause less problems for patients, but any heating system can trigger problems for allergy patients just by doing its job.

When the home is heated too much, it can become too dry, Daftary said. This causes a patient's respiratory system problems. When your throat and nose feels dry and scratchy, you may not have enough humidity.

To solve that, use a humidifier. However, Daftary said, humidifiers also cause problems if they're not regularly cleaned. The humidity should be set on about 50 or less, she said, and the unit should be cleaned every other week. Fail to slide by these

guidelines, and you'll likely suffer allergies caused by mold in the humidifier's system.

"Dust mites and mold both cause problems," Daftary said. "They're the biggest culprits in winter allergies."

She recommends using electrostatic air filters. If used in a central heating and air conditioning system, such filters should be cleaned every two weeks. Patients may also use portable models, which can be moved from room to room.

The American Lung Association has also released a checklist of tips to ward off indoor allergies this winter. Among them:

— Put a damper on dust: Dust twice weekly with a damp cloth to capture dust. Using a dry cloth or feather duster will only stir up the dust, and then it will resetttle.

Those with severe allergies or asthma can use a vacuum with a high efficiency particulate air (HEPA) filter to capture allergen; use double vacuum bags and change them regularly.

Get a hold on mold: Keep mold to a minimum by cleaning your house with fungicide. A homemade version is chlorine bleach properly mixed with water. A good formula is 1 part bleach to 20 parts water. Pay special attention to bathrooms and a panel of ledges, favorite hiding places for mold.

Avoid dust collectors at your window: Get rid of heavy drapes or venetian blinds or mini-blinds, which collect dust. Select sheer, washable curtains or a panel of lace. For nighttime privacy, use a

roller shade or vertical blinds. — Control the greenhouse effect: If you bring plants indoors during the winter, keep the number to a minimum. Avoid bringing plants into your bedroom. Houseplants can boost humidity and harbor mold.

Control the environment: When setting the heater thermostat, keep the temperature as low as tolerable. Dust mites prefer temperatures above 70 degrees. Place several layers of a cheesecloth filter under the faceplate of your bedroom central heating vent to help filter indoor allergens.

Decorate defensively: When redecorating, avoid dried flowers, which collect dust and mold and are difficult to keep clean.

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