

EXPLANATION OF MANAGEMENT OF HOUSE DUST ALLERGY

Housedust allergy is an extremely common problem often being noted as early as 1-6 months of age, and represents as recurrent coughs or colds, long-standing eczema, later on may present as asthma, abdominal discomfort and pain of a periodic nature, sinusitis, irritability, or with muscle pain on exertion - exhaustion for no reason - recurrent bouts of sneezing and many other non-specific symptoms.

This type of allergy is commoner in damp climates such as we experience in Britain and often symptoms may completely disappear when the patient who has this allergy goes to a dry, warm climate. The reasons for this happening is that the housedust mite lives on protein which is often derived from the skin scales that human beings or animals are constantly losing from their bodies. The skin scales however must be converted by mould or fungi into a suitable form for the mites to eat and the commonest area this happens is in the beds that we normally sleep on. Within two to three weeks of sleeping on a bed, there is quite an amount of skin scale debris in the bedding and bed clothes, and this is then broken down by the moulds and fungi, which get into the bed which, as well as being warm, are also quite damp from the perspiration that we give off each night. It follows that within two to three months of sleeping on a bed, there is quite a mass of housedust mites, not only in the bedding but in the pillows and blankets or downies that are used. The patient who gets away from this environment often experiences marked relief and as mentioned already, this happens when such a person goes to a hot dry climate where there is no breakdown of their skin scales, as moulds and fungi are not present to the same extent.

First aid measures therefore to initially avoid exposure to housedust mite would be the covering of a mattress with thin plastic, which could be sellotaped round the mattress, and completely envelop it. The base of the bed should also be treated in the same manner and the plastic on the mattress should be covered with an acrylic or polyester underblanket. Bedding should be washed every two to three months as well as the pillows, and any dust containing materials in the room should be removed or washed. These could include children's soft toys or bean bags or similar household items.

In the summer time it is a good idea to put the mattress out to dry before covering it with plastic, and this technique should be looked upon as a temporary measure. As soon as possible, the affected person should invest in a new mattress and cover that immediately with plastic, or a proper mattress cover which could be obtained from a pharmacist such as Boots or one of the Appliance Manufacturers such as Buchanans. The reason for the importance of covering the mattress right away, is that no skin scales get into the bed and therefore the housedust mite never enters into the mattress. There is virtually no exposure to the housedust mite in a bed of this nature.

The plastic covered mattress which already has housedust mites in it, is a constant source of minimal challenge as it is quite impossible to completely stop the mites from getting into the atmosphere when a person is sleeping on a bed containing the housedust mite.

An allergic challenge may occur within a few minutes of exposure and in cases of eczema may last as long as 4-6 weeks.

Improvement in symptoms is normally seen within 1-2 days but full benefit may not be noted till a few weeks have elapsed.

LONG TERM AVOIDANCE OF EXPOSURE TO HOUSE DUST MITE

BEDS AND BEDDING.

The most important consideration,

Mattresses should be new and covered with a plastic or PVC cover. This cover prevents any penetration of the mite into the foam and has the advantage that it is easily wiped clean. Pillows may be washable, non-allergic or solid foam. Acrylan or polyester underblankets are available which counteract the cold feel of the plastic cover and prevent slipping of the overlying bed-clothes.

All sheets, blankets, quilts or downies must be readily washable and should be thoroughly washed and aired every two to three months. Materials such as polyester/cotton, Acrylan and dacron are ideal; Using these materials it is possible to wash the underblanket, blankets and downies in the morning, and even in winter-time, having them dried and back on the bed by evening. This saves having to duplicate blankets, quilts, etc. in order to achieve the mandatory 2-3 monthly wash.

The base of the bed should be of simple springs or wooden slats. No upholstered divan bases.

OTHER POINTS TO WATCH.

Soft toys such as teddy bears and golliwogs can become infested with housedust mites as readily as bedding. These should therefore be made of washable materials and treated similarly to the bed. Bean bags suffer from the same problems.

Sufferers from housedust mite allergy should not sleep in or sit or bounce on other beds unless these have been treated in a similar fashion to their own. If there is more than one bed in the patient's bedroom, then these other beds must be treated also, otherwise there will be an aerosol effect of house dust mites from these beds with every movement of their occupants.

Children must be advised not to bounce on upholstered furniture, crawl under beds or hide in wardrobes. Vacuuming of carpets must not be done in the presence of the housedust allergy sufferer and preferably not within two hours of him being around.

If the sufferer is the housewife, it is advisable that all the beds in the house be treated so that she does not become exposed when dealing with the beds of other members of the family. She should also either get someone else to do the vacuuming for her, or else wear an efficient mask while performing this task. Ducted-air central heating should be avoided as this spreads house dust mites throughout the whole atmosphere of the house. Underfloor heating has the same effect.

HOLIDAYS

The problem of sleeping arrangements while on holiday are easily dealt with. The patient should take with him his own pillow, a large sheet of good quality plastic, and a washable sleeping bag (and blankets if desired). The plastic is spread over the entire bed on which he will sleep, and the sleeping bag and pillow placed on top. Ideally there should be no-one else sharing his/her room.