

Welcome Spring... Achoo!

I am so excited that spring is finally here! Being able to go outside for walks and flower bed work is nothing short of therapeutic. Although they are excited for warmer temperatures, I am not so sure my husband and children are excited to do the same things.

Of my family of five, only two of us don't have problems with seasonal allergies. The outdoor activities that give me relief and relaxation give others in my family headaches, itchy eyes, and stuffy stinging noses, i.e. allergic reactions.

The National Institute of Health defines allergic reactions as "sensitivities to substances called allergens that come into contact with the skin, nose, eyes, respiratory tract, and gastrointestinal tract. They can be breathed into the lungs, swallowed, or injected."

Some of the most common substances that cause allergic reactions (known as allergens) include

- animal dander
- pollen from trees, flowers, bushes
- insect stings & bites (bee stings, mosquito bites, etc.)
- foods (such as peanuts, milk, gluten, fish & more)
- plants
- medication(s)

Most of the allergic reactions my family experiences are mild in nature and are treated with over-the-counter medications (such as antihistamines.) Some common mild allergic reactions include itchy watery eyes, nasal congestion, rashes, and hives. In addition to oral medication, you can apply cool compresses and over-the-counter hydrocortisone cream to the affected areas of the body. If the reaction is caused by a bee sting, the stinger needs to be removed. Be careful not to squeeze the stinger because that will cause more of the venom to be released. For this reason, avoid using tweezers. Instead, use something firm like a fingernail or the edge of a plastic credit card to scrape the stinger out. If the allergic reaction continues to cause distress for the person, contact a doctor and seek medical attention.

Some allergic reactions are much more serious and warrant immediate medical attention. Moderate or severe reactions may include abdominal pain, difficulty with breathing, swelling in the face, around the eyes, or the tongue, nausea and/or vomiting, and coughing, just to name a few. In extreme cases, a person could experience anaphylactic shock (or anaphylaxis) and/or lose consciousness. In these cases, call 911. Do not wait to see if the symptoms subside – anaphylaxis can be life-threatening. If the person has emergency medication available, help them ingest or inject it as quickly as possible. If the person is having troubles with their breathing, avoid oral medication as it could cause them to choke.

In many cases, actions can be taken that will reduce or remove the potential for allergic reactions.

- If there is a history of allergic reaction to a food, avoid consuming it. If you are eating at a friend's house or at a restaurant, ask about the ingredients used in the food you plan to

consume. Sometimes the contents of a food are not easy to identify. Being proactive to avoid exposure to the food-based allergen is important.

- If food allergies have been identified in a child, introduce new foods to them one at a time. This will help you isolate the source, should an allergic reaction occur.
- Keep the windows of your home closed to avoid pollen from coming in. The screens on your windows are no protection from the pollen particles that float on the breeze.
- From my own personal experience, don't hang your sheets on the clothesline if you have seasonal allergies. Although I love the smell and crisp feeling of line-dried sheets, my allergy-prone husband and children suffer greatly if I choose to hang clothes on the line. On warmer days during the winter, I can get away with it. With spring here, the clothes line remains empty for such items.
- Keep over-the-counter allergy medications on hand. Topical lotions and antihistamines should be part of any well-stocked first-aid kit.

Often times, our indoor air causes us as much trouble as the outdoor air does. Fine particles and gases float through the door as we enter from outside and become trapped. Many of the particles found inside a home are generated from the indoor environment, as well. Two of the more common sources of indoor allergens are dust mites and animal dander.

Dust mites are normal bi-product of the human body. They are found in highest concentration in carpet, bedding, mattresses, and other fabric-covered surfaces. To reduce these allergens in the home, vacuum intensively and regularly. If possible, use a vacuum with a high-efficiency filter. Keep in mind that even the most faithful vacuuming schedule will not remove all dust mites from a home. A weekly schedule, however, can reduce the level of dust mites. The Allergy and Asthma Foundation of America recommends hardwood, vinyl, linoleum tile, or slate floors in homes of persons with allergies. This organization is a valuable resource for individuals who need more information about living with allergies and asthma. Check out their website at [www.aafa.org](http://www.aafa.org).

Animal dander is another common household allergen. The best solution for individuals with allergies to animal dander is to remove the pet from the home. While vacuuming may catch some of the dander, it does not have a significant impact on reducing the amount of animal dander and can, in fact, stir more dander into the air rather than reduce it. If the home has non-carpeted floors, it is best to wet clean these surfaces.

Being aware of the source of allergic reactions is the first step in reducing or eliminating them. Once the source is determined, that will give you an idea of what "next steps" to take. Contact me at the Geary County Extension office (785) 238-4161 if you have questions about household or food allergens. Until next time, keep living resourcefully!