

## Winter Allergy Alert

### *This Year Enjoy the Season Allergy Free!*

By: Sanjeev Jain, MD, PhD  
Columbia Asthma & Allergy Clinic

While most people don't think of allergies as they are shopping for the Thanksgiving turkey or trimming the family Christmas tree, winter can be one of the most challenging times each year for those who suffer from allergies. Winter means cold weather and cold weather means more time indoors. The winter confinement leaves us more susceptible to indoor allergens such as pet dander from family cat or dog, dust mites and mold.

Allergies are caused by a reaction of the immune system to an allergen. To make matters worse our climate here in the Pacific Northwest accelerates allergy symptoms due to the increased rain and humidity. These climate conditions are havens for mold and dust mites. The moisture in this climate makes these allergens grow more rapidly. To make matters worse, winter is the peak time of the year for colds and flu which can flare-up asthma, sinusitis and other allergy related conditions.

This year when you are on your way to Grandmother's house to enjoy all the joy the holidays have to bring, you can do so allergy free. Here are some of the winter allergy enemies and ways you can fight back!

**Enemy #1: Dust Mites.** The peskiest enemy here in the Northwest is the dust mite. This is a microscopic insect that lives in all mattresses, pillows, padded furniture, carpet, and stuffed animals. Dust mites feed on dander or dead skin that we all shed continually and they extract water from the air.

**How do I fight back?** The most effective ways of controlling dust mites are to wash bedding in hot water above 130 degrees once every two weeks, keep the humidity below 50% indoors, and to use dust mite proof covers on mattresses and pillows. Dust mite allergies can be diagnosed, medications can be provided to treat symptoms and specialized therapies can be used to desensitize patients to dust mites.

**Enemy #2: Pet Dander.** Even the most beloved of animals shed dead skin or dander. Pets such as dogs and cats shed dander regardless of how much hair they have. Even having a small pet like a hamster or rabbit, does not mean less risk of allergies.

**How do I fight back?** If you are allergic to your pet, the best option is to remove the pet from the house. Keeping the pet at least out of your bedroom will help; however, dander is microscopic and is carried through the air. Having a HEPA filter (High Efficiency Particulate Air filter) running continuously in the bedroom with the door

closed is the best way to minimize symptoms. Cat dander is especially stubborn because it is sticky and can be a problem for up to six months after the removal of the cat. Bathing a cat twice a week has been shown to help reduce dander in the air. Pet allergies can be diagnosed and patients can be provided with medications or desensitization therapies. Many people can keep their pets even if they're allergic to them by using desensitization therapy.

**Enemy # 3: Mold.** Mold allergies are very prevalent and are more common in winter because of the time we spend inside. The root cause of mold growth indoors is high humidity or water damage.

**How do I fight back?** High humidity can be controlled by leaving bathroom fans on during and after a shower, and using an exhaust fan in the kitchen whenever cooking. A dehumidifier can also be used if the fans are not sufficient in controlling the moisture. Water damage in a house must be repaired promptly and thoroughly by a licensed contractor to reduce the chances of mold growth. Any visible mold must be removed with the appropriate cleansers. Most allergy symptoms are caused by air borne molds and treatments can range from the use of a hygrometer to measure humidity, dehumidifiers to reduce humidity, and HEPA filtration to remove air borne molds. Therapies to desensitize are recommended for long term treatment.

### **Don't wait for spring to think about allergies.**

Most of us start thinking about allergies in the spring. Don't wait for the trees to bloom and the grass to grow to think about allergies. Winter allergies are common and can be more troublesome than spring allergies. These allergies are worse in the Pacific Northwest because of the increased amounts of rain and humidity, which accelerate the growth of molds and dust mites. Visit your allergy specialist. Your specialist can help treat these troublesome winter allergies by recommending the proper environmental control measures, medications and desensitization therapies.

*Dr. Sanjeev Jain is the Medical Director of Columbia Asthma & Allergy Clinic located in Camas and Longview, Washington. Dr. Jain is a renowned expert in the Asthma and Allergy field. To contact Dr. Jain at the Camas location call (360)834-6700 or (360)696-1020 at the Longview. The Columbia Asthma & Allergy Clinic is located at 3400 SE 196<sup>th</sup> Ave., Suite 101 in Camas and 788 14<sup>th</sup> Ave in Longview.*