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WINTER ALLERGIES

As winter approaches, cold temperatures reduce most of the outdoor allergens in the United States, bringing much-needed relief for allergy and asthma sufferers. For many, this time of year makes it easy to breathe again. However, the holiday season is just around the corner and as we gather inside, there are potential allergy triggers lurking.

Food Allergies During the Holidays

Food plays a big role in many holiday gatherings, so if you have a food allergy, it's a time to be especially cautious. Friends and relatives may have prepared meals that could trigger an allergic reaction. It only takes a small amount of food to trigger a dangerous allergic reaction. Food allergies can be severe and even life threatening if proper steps are not taken to avoid the risk of accidental exposure.

Homemade items don't usually come with ingredient lists. In addition, they may be contaminated with trace amounts of allergenic foods through contact with storage containers, kitchen utensils or baking sheets. To prevent an allergic reaction to food:

- Inform the host about your food allergy and ask about the ingredients used to prepare each dish.
- Prepare with an auto-injectable dose of epinephrine when attending a holiday party where unrecognized food allergens could be hiding.
- Remind family members and friends that strict avoidance is important when managing food allergies and that even one little bite can be dangerous.

It's Not Your Tree That Makes You Sneeze

Feel like you are allergic to your Christmas tree? The fact is, you may be allergic to microscopic mold spores found on evergreens that reproduce when brought indoors. These mold spores can trigger allergies and asthma, causing symptoms like sneezing, an itchy nose and watery eyes. Most trees are cut in October and stored, so they have a lot of mold from being out in the rain and slush. The best suggestion is to use an artificial tree. However, since dust can be a problem, be sure to shake it out and clean as possible. If you do get a live tree, try to shake it out and then let it dry for a week or so before you bring it inside. To avoid mold, allow your tree to dry out in an enclosed porch or garage, while keeping the trunk in a bucket of water so it stays green. You may also want to explore whether your tree retailer provides a shaking machine that can help rid your tree of mold. Remember, you'll also want to shake and dry out live wreaths and other greenery you might use for decorating.

The holidays can bring about other triggers that are not normally a part of your life. Here are a few tips to help you avoid a serious allergic reaction this holiday season:

- Take along your own pillow with an allergen-proof cover or request down-free pillows if staying in a hotel or at a relative's house. Dust mites can be especially troublesome if traveling away from home.
- Beware of the "Thanksgiving Effect," which consists of a flare-up of allergy or asthma symptoms that occur after an interval of being away from your family cat or dog. Some allergic people will actually lose their tolerance to their own pets during a period away from home.
- Avoid getting too stressed out from the hustle and bustle of the holidays. Stress levels can sometimes lead to an asthma attack because chemicals that are released by the body during times of stress can lead to tightening of the muscles around the air passages in the lungs, making it difficult to breathe. Deep breathing and relaxation can help.
- Be sure to follow directions carefully when spraying artificial snow on windows or other surfaces. These sprays can irritate your lungs if you inhale them.

