

What Are Dust Mites?

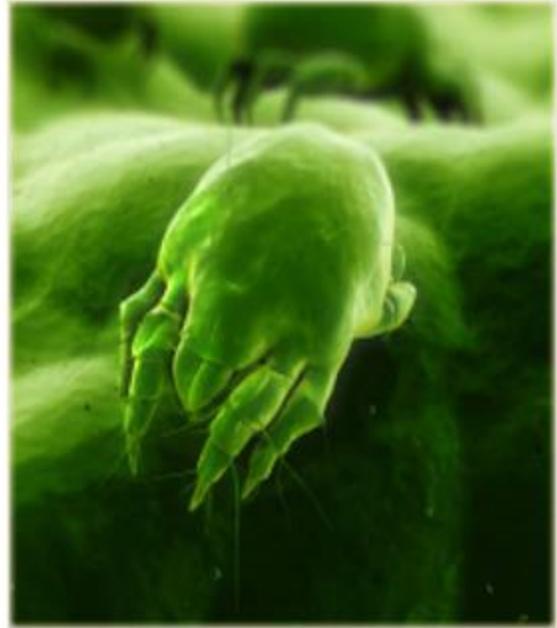
Dust mites (or house dust mites) belong to the arachnid family, which also includes spiders, ticks and chiggers.

The mites thrive in warm, humid environments. Because they feed on skin flakes shed by humans and animal dander, dust mites are common in areas populated by people and pets.

Invisible to the human eye, dust mites measure just 1/100 to 1/64 of an inch. Depending on their species, mites live for approximately 30 or 100 days, laying eggs and secreting about 10 to 20 waste particles per day.

Although enlarged photos of dust mites make them appear frightening, dust mites pose only a minor threat to humans. They do not bite or live on humans. Still, for people who are allergic to dust mite proteins, this small pest can cause major suffering.

According to the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), exposure to dust mites can trigger asthma in children who have not previously exhibited asthma symptoms.



Dust Mite Allergy Information

Dust mite allergies are triggered by proteins found in the mites' cast-off body parts, secretions and feces. Decreasing the allergen is effective in reducing the symptoms.

Typical dust mite allergy symptoms include:

- Sneezing
- Runny nose
- Irritated eyes
- Skin irritation
- Asthma symptoms

Because dust mites flourish year-round in the home, dust mite allergy symptoms are usually not seasonal.



Dust Mite Products

The National Institutes of Health and Mayo Clinic both suggest encasing pillows and mattresses in dust-proof or allergen impermeable covers. To be a successful barrier to dust mites and their waste, the cover should be made of woven fabric and have a pore size smaller than 10 microns.

You can use a conventional vacuum cleaner outfitted with an upholstery brush to vacuum your mattress. (Be sure the vacuum has a high-quality HEPA filter.) Specially designed bed vacuums are also available.

The American College of Allergy, Asthma and Immunology states that typical household insecticides are not effective in dust mite protection.

Before investing in dust mite products, sprays or dust mite protection services, ask your allergist for further advice on removing dust mites from your home.

If you're buying down pillows or comforters, Johns Hopkins University researchers say feathers should be thoroughly cleaned before they're stuffed into a bedding product. The researchers say nearly all American feather companies clean feathers routinely, but that some foreign manufacturers do not take this extra step.



Preventing Dust Mites

In general, the best way to reduce dust mites in the home is to:

- Clear dust-harboring surfaces or items from a room
- Cover pillows, mattresses and comforters with mite-proof encasings
- Clean bedding, furniture and flooring in the room frequently

The National Institutes of Health and the Mayo Clinic explain that eradicating dust mites completely is not possible, but you can reduce the number of dust mites in your home by:



- **Reducing Humidity:** Dust mites are rarely found in areas with less than 50% humidity. It may decrease allergy symptoms to lower humidity by running an air-conditioner or dehumidifier. Opening windows may cool a room, but can allow pollen--another potential allergen -- into the home.
- **Frequent Laundering:** Weekly washing of bedding is recommended to kill dust mites, although experts disagree on the most effective method. The National Institutes of Health recommends washing bedding in hot water (130 to 140 degrees F). According to the American Thoracic Society, a Korean researcher recently found that washing at a lower temperature is also effective, if the laundry is given a three-minute rinsing with cold water twice.
- **Dusting and Vacuuming:** Cleaning can actually stir up dust mite particles, so it's best to have someone who is not allergic complete these chores. If not, an allergy sufferer should wear a mask when dusting or vacuuming, then allow 20 minutes for dust to settle before re-entering a cleaned room. Damp dusting traps more dust mite particles than dry dusting. A vacuum with a HEPA filter or micro-filter bag will help remove dust mite particles.

- **Freezing:** Placing items such as pillows or stuffed toys in a freezer can also help kill dust mites. Enclose the items in plastic first, freeze for 24 to 48 hours, then vacuum or hand-wash items to remove dust mite bodies and byproducts.
- **Removing Soft Surfaces:** Coverings like carpet and upholstery make cozy nests for dust mites. Removing carpeting, padded furniture and fabric window coverings can make a room less friendly to dust mites. If you do prefer a soft floor covering, opt for a throw rug that can be washed, rather than wall-to-wall carpeting. Blinds or shutters that can be wiped down are a good substitute for non-washable drapes or curtains.
- **Filtering the Air:** A high-efficiency media filter with a MERV rating of 11 or 12 for your home's HVAC system is recommended by the American College of Allergy, Asthma and Immunology. The agency also suggests changing the filter every three months. Other agencies, such as the Clemson University Cooperative Extension, state that air filters for the home's central heating and cooling system are ineffective in controlling dust mite populations. The Association of Home Appliance Manufacturers (AHAM) certifies portable electric room air cleaners.

• FAQs

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- **Q. Is it true after one year, the average pillow contains much of its weight in dust mite feces?**
 - A. Studies estimate dust mite waste comprises between 10 and 25% of a pillow's weight after a year or two of use. A study reported in the British Medical Journal in 1996 found that polyester fiber pillows actually contained more grams of fine dust than feather pillows. Ohio State University researchers recommend replacing synthetic fill pillows every two to three years.
 - **Q. What kind of bedding should I buy for a child with allergies?**
 - A. Consult your allergist or health professional for more information, but whatever fibers you choose, be sure to encase the child's mattress, pillow and comforter with a dust-mite resistant cover or encasing and wash bedding frequently.
 - **Q. Does thread count matter when purchasing mite-proof covers?**
 - A. Thread counts above 230 will help form a barrier to allergens. A fabric's pore size should be smaller than 10 microns to resist dust mites.