

Why is bedding important?

Avoiding common causes of allergies (such as house dust mites) may be one way to delay the development of allergic diseases (such as eczema or hay fever) and maybe even asthma.

The main reason bedding has been associated with the development of allergy or asthma is that it provides the perfect environment for the house dust mite. Infants in particular spend a large amount of time in bed and this may increase their risk of becoming allergic.

We still don't really know whether being allergic to house dust mites makes babies more likely to develop asthma and research is being carried out in this area.

Reducing exposure to house dust mites may reduce the likelihood of the baby becoming allergic to them but does not appear to alter the development of wheezing or asthma in later childhood.

What are house dust mites?

House dust mites are tiny insects, about a quarter of a millimetre long, which makes them hard to see with the naked eye. They live off human skin scales and thrive in warm humid climates. Mites are found in bedding, carpets, soft furnishings and clothing.

House dust mites often cause allergies because many people react to proteins (allergens) contained in their droppings. These droppings can continue to cause allergic symptoms even after the mite has died.

The more someone is exposed to house dust mites, the more likely it is that he or she will become allergic to them

Keeping bedding free from mites

There are some ways you can reduce the amount of house dust mites and their allergens in your child's bed.

Dust-proof covers for mattresses, pillows and doonas (called *encasings*) are widely available from manchester shops and department stores. Some health funds provide a rebate for their purchase. These covers must be washed every 2 months. If covers are not available, blankets and washable quilts or doonas should be washed at least every 2 months to remove allergens. Dry cleaning of these and other bedding will kill the mites but does not remove the allergens.

Even if you use dust-proof covers, you should wash all sheets, pillowcases, quilt or doona covers and cotton blankets once a week to remove both mites and allergens. The type of washing product that is used doesn't seem to make a marked difference to the amount of mites that are killed. Even laundry products containing chemicals to kill mites (acaricides) don't seem to be much more effective than a normal washing product. However, you do need to wash the bedding in hot water (55°C or more). If you can only wash in cooler water, use a product containing essential oils, such as tea tree or eucalyptus oil.

Bedding should be washed weekly in hot water ($\geq 55^{\circ}\text{C}$) using a standard laundry product. If washing in cold water, use a product containing essential oils.

What about sheepskins?

Because they are warm and hold moisture, sheepskins make a perfect breeding ground for mites. For infants under 12 months, they may also increase the risk of Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS).

Sheepskins are not recommended as infant bedding.

Soft toys

Soft toys provide yet another place for house dust mites to live and breed. If you give your child a soft toy to take to bed, find one that can be washed in hot water and get into the habit of washing it once a week with the bedding. You can put toys in the freezer overnight to kill the house dust mites, but this will not remove the allergens. Sheepskins are not recommended as infant bedding. Infants under 12 months should not have soft toys in the cot as they may increase the risk of SIDS.

What type of bedding is best?

For some time it was recommended that people who have asthma (or who are more likely to develop asthma) avoid feather bedding and choose synthetic materials (eg foam, polyester or dacron) as they withstand frequent washing. This is now not thought to be the case.

New studies have shown that not only does synthetic bedding have higher levels of house dust mites and their allergens than feather bedding, it may also increase the risk of infants developing wheeze.

This may be because the synthetic materials give off substances that irritate the airways and make them more

susceptible to allergens. Again, this is an area where we have much to learn.

In the meantime, it seems sensible to use low allergen bedding for infants and children at high risk of allergy or asthma. Where possible, use encasings for mattresses, pillows and doonas, rather than plastic covers.

Low allergen bedding should be used. Feather bedding pillows and quilts have substantially lower mite allergen levels than synthetic bedding. The use of bulky items such as pillows and quilts (feather or synthetic) is not recommended for infants under 12 months because of the increased risk of SIDS.

What is asthma?

Asthma is a reversible narrowing of the airways in the lungs. Asthma symptoms include wheezing, coughing (particularly at night), chest tightness, difficulty in breathing and shortness of breath

Asthma is a manageable health condition. Although at present there is no cure, with good management, people with asthma can lead normal, active lives.

Is my baby likely to develop asthma?

Asthma is common among Australian children. Some babies are more likely to develop asthma.

The reasons behind this are still not clear but we do know that the development of asthma may be more likely if:

- there is a family history of asthma.
- the mother smokes during pregnancy or the baby is exposed to passive smoke.

Further information

Talk to your doctor or pharmacist, or contact the Asthma Foundation in your State or Territory on 1800 645 130.

Asthma Australia website: www.asthmaaustralia.org.au

National Asthma Council website: www.NationalAsthma.org.au

Commonwealth Department of Health and Ageing HealthInsite: www.healthinsite.gov.au

Australasian Society for Clinical Immunology and Allergy website: www.allergy.org.au

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