

The impact of Hurricane Harvey on allergy sufferers

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Although the floodwaters have mostly receded and people have begun to return to and repair their homes, the health impacts of Hurricane Harvey are just beginning. One of the most common health issues that people are facing are worsening allergies, and there are numerous reasons for this, according to one Baylor College of Medicine expert.

"The impact of Harvey on those with allergies is negative. When there is an event that brings more moisture into an already high-humidity environment such as Texas, then allergies are only going to get worse. And unfortunately, not just for a short period of time but for decades after," said Dr. David Corry, professor and chief of the section of immunology, allergy and rheumatology at Baylor.

One of the most common reasons people are suffering from allergies is because of mold, Corry said. Anytime houses have been flooded, mold will grow unless properly treated. Also, there is lot of wet housing material laying around waiting to be picked up, and this debris can be a breeding ground for mold.

Another cause of allergies are plants that are not being properly maintained, he said.

"While mold is a huge part of this, certainly the excess water around will cause all kinds of plants to grow, and there is also a disruption of normal services like mowing and general yard maintenance so plants are growing out of control. There are going to be a lot of weeds pollenating when

they normally would not," Corry said.

In addition, the usual housekeeping that people do has been disrupted by the storm, and Corry said there is more dust building up, which has all kinds of irritants in it, including dust mites and cat and dog danders, that could potentially contribute to allergies.

Corry explained that along with mold and pollen, toxic waste sites that have been flooded also are a serious problem for those with allergies. Many chemicals that have been disposed of at these sites are volatile, and they can irritate the respiratory track, especially for those with pre-existing allergies of the skin or the respiratory track, making allergy symptoms worse.

To help people alleviate their [allergy symptoms](#), Corry offered the following tips:

- For those whose houses have been flooded, hire a reliable contractor who has experience with home remediation and take as much time as needed to get the house completely remediated. Also, do not put carpets back in the house because they tend to retain allergens. Instead, install hardwood or tile floors or another type of flooring that is not carpeting.
- The humidity of the house, whether flooded or not, is something that should be monitored. This may mean running your [air conditioner](#) a little bit cooler than normal or having it adjusted by a trained air conditioner technician. You may need to add a dehumidifying device to the air conditioner if necessary. Humidity in the [house](#) should be kept between 40 to 45 percent.
- Houses should be kept as dust free as possible. That means using a high-quality vacuum cleaner with a HEPA filter and changing the air conditioner filter regularly.
- For those who don't know what they are allergic to, a trip to the

allergist for skin testing may help. Once you know what you are sensitive to, you will know what to avoid.

- For some people, immunotherapy in the form of allergy shots may be needed if over-the-counter [allergy](#) medications are not useful. Shots are the only therapy that are potentially curative of allergies.
- Wearing a mask to protect you from allergens also can be helpful.

Provided by Baylor College of Medicine

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