

# Nothing to sneeze at

Get this: one in three Aussies live in an allergic daze. Do you? Here, how to beat symptoms, one sniffle at a time

BY JOHN ROSENTHAL

If spending spring and summer outside or petting a too-cute cat leave you feeling like a cousin of that achoo-ing Disney dwarf (complete with watery eyes, runny nose and chronic sneezing), join the club. Unfortunately for us, women get the short end of the allergy stick. While pimply school boys are more likely to grow out of their allergies by the time they become men, women tend to be more vulnerable as adults. Hormones are probably to blame. "There are allergic genes that can be turned on or off by hormonal changes," explains William Anderson, a US allergy specialist. It's enough to get you down - and definitely not out. But you don't have to spend a summer (or lifetime) holed up hermit-like at home. A host of products, combined with the latest medical strategies to combat allergic symptoms, can help you breathe easy again. >>



definitely want this puppy, since you spend (hopefully) eight hours in there every night snoozing.

## Wash it out

In a perfect world, allergy sufferers would send their laundry out and have a maid bring it back. If hiring help isn't an option, wash clothes in water hotter than 60°, which will kill dust mites and do away with allergens. For a green option, wash bedding with Bosisto's Eucalyptus Dust Mite Wash (\$14.96, [elaundry.com.au](http://elaundry.com.au)) and use Bosisto's EucoFresh Allergen Wash (2, \$12.95, [elaundry.com.au](http://elaundry.com.au)) with your weekly cycle. Hot tumble-drying will help kill mites but, if pollen is your kryptonite, don't hang out laundry first thing in the morning, when pollen is worst.

## Get pets wet

Pet dander is a stomach-turning combo of animal saliva and dead skin – disaster for allergy sufferers. But now you can stay sneeze-free with the world's first hypoallergenic cat, Lifestyle Pets Allerca (from \$12,300, [allerca.com](http://allerca.com)). We kid you not. But for the uncashed-up among us, just make sure you wash your furry friend religiously once a week (bathing prevents dander build-up), and let him/her spend time outside – or, at least off your quilt cover (you can live without the paw prints).

## Take a few drugs

Still suffering? Next season, take a preemptive strike. Dr Loblay suggests combining antihistamines

with a steroid nasal spray, such as Rhinocort. “The sprays have a longer term effect in dampening the inflammation in the membranes, which prevents the acute reactions (such as sneezing or blocked nose) when the person is exposed to the allergen,” he explains. “Used in combination with antihistamines, these are probably the best defence.” (Antihistamines reduce sneezing, itchy eyes and runny noses while blocking the effects of histamine, a chemical released by the body during allergic reactions). If you know you're going somewhere pollen is rife, like the park, Dr Loblay recommends taking an antihistamine before you go as a preventative measure. If over-the-counter medicines don't do the trick, speak to your doctor about prescription medications such as Rhinocort Aqueous or Avamys.

It's also possible to desensitise the immune system with a vaccine. This is called immunotherapy, and your GP can refer you to a consultant allergist, who'll prescribe and monitor treatment. Although it generally takes three years for complete desensitisation, doctors in the UK are seeking approval for the Pollinex Quattro vaccine, which claims to improve hayfever symptoms with just four jabs over a three-week period. A spokesperson for the company says it hopes to start the approval process for the vaccine in Australia in “the near future”.

We know, the waiting's a bitch. But think of it as time to avoid dog-sitting the neighbour's poodle. **WH**



## NEXT-GEN SOLUTIONS

**HOME:** The latest thing in domestic cleaning services is eco-cleaning, which is meant to be a healthier cleaning service option for allergy sufferers. Green Clean Australia ([greenclean.com.au](http://greenclean.com.au)) in Sydney will come to your home, remove dust and mould, and do a general tidy-up without using any chemicals, which can often trigger allergic episodes. “Our cleaning services are specifically designed for those suffering from allergies and asthma,” says managing director Michael Girowal. EnviroSmile Domestic Cleaning Services ([envirosmilecleaning.com.au](http://envirosmilecleaning.com.au)) provides a similar service in Melbourne.

**AWAY:** Does staying in a hotel room set you off? Now, for a little extra, overseas travellers can stay in accommodation specially designed to fend off allergies. The Premier Hotel in New York City ([milleniumhotels.com](http://milleniumhotels.com)) offers 16 “pure rooms” that undergo a seven-step process to dramatically reduce bacteria, dust mites and pollen before you check in. The Fairmont Hotel Vancouver in Canada devotes an entire floor to those with environmental allergies. It offers 42 rooms that have special filtration systems to purify air and water, as well as a central vacuum system to reduce dust allergens, and a nut-free bar. This service hasn't made its way to Australia yet, but you can ask hotel receptions for feather-free pillows, fragrance-free bath products and other allergy-fighting features.



## Why you suffer

Seasonal nasal allergies, also known as hay fever (technical name: allergic rhinitis), are basically a sign of an immune system in overdrive. When some people encounter, say, grass pollen, their immune system misreads it as a dangerous outsider and releases an antibody called immunoglobulin E (IgE). This causes inflammation of mucous membranes that line your nose, mouth and lungs. And then your nose is off and running, your eyes start itching and your throat tickles.

About one in three Aussies have allergies. Some suffer unknowingly from mild allergies, while others claim to be allergic to everything from perfume to their mothers-in-law. "Nobody knows exactly how and why people become allergic and what factors lead to that. But it seems to be a combination of genetic predisposition and exposure," says Dr Robert Loblay, of Sydney's Royal Prince Alfred Hospital allergy unit. "Allergies often run in families.



## 'TIS THE SEASON

The height of hayfever season is between late September and December, with pollen levels peaking between 6am and noon. That's for the southern states; the season peaks at different times between the states. Thunderstorms can be particularly troublesome, as when pollen gets wet it releases starch granules small enough to be inhaled, triggering hayfever. The CSIRO provides an all-year pollen calendar across all states at [dar.csiro.au/airwatch/awpollen5.html](http://dar.csiro.au/airwatch/awpollen5.html). For a guide to pollens commonly found in Australia and more details on allergies, check out the patient info section of the Australasian Society of Clinical Immunology and Allergy's website, [allergy.org.au](http://allergy.org.au).

You're more likely to develop them if your parents have them."

Experts predict the numbers will keep climbing, and this may be due to our love of Dettol. "The 'hygiene hypothesis' theory has shown some evidence that our obsession with cleanliness could be to blame," says Dr Loblay. According to this hypothesis, if you are in a squeaky clean home and not exposed to bacterial toxins early in life, the immune system is more likely to produce IgE, which causes allergies.

## Do something

The most effective strategy to deal with allergies is the same you use to fight extra kilos – stop them before they start. The first step is a no-brainer: learn what you're allergic to. A skin-prick test is the best way to diagnose allergies. "There is also a blood test, but it's more expensive, takes longer to get the results back and is less sensitive," explains Dr Loblay. "The skin-prick test is quick and gets results usually within 15 minutes." Next step, grab some great new products that can help crush the culprits. To save you time, we've quizzed the experts on what can alleviate allergy symptoms.

## Fight the mites

No matter what your relationship status, you're definitely not sleeping alone. Every night, thousands of dust mites settle on your mattress and linen to feed on dead skin cells. Depending on the age of your mattress, you could be sleeping with

between 100,000 to 10,000,000 mites. Sleep Comfort's pillow and mattress protectors (from \$16.95, [thebedroom.com.au](http://thebedroom.com.au)) are designed to be impenetrable to dust mites.

## Suck it up

Vacuums with a HEPA (high-efficiency particulate air) filter can absorb dust and mould and reduce the amount of dust that comes back out of the vacuum cleaner. Go for the Dyson DC23 Motorhead (3, \$1099, [dyson.com.au](http://dyson.com.au)), which has been shown to improve air quality by as much as 150 per cent. As with all Dyson vacuum cleaners, it has been accepted by the National Asthma Council's Sensitive Choice program.

## Air your issues

While air purifiers haven't yet been shown clinically to reduce symptoms, they expel negative ions said to attract dust and pollen to help the air purification process. Trouble is, most air purifiers are so bulky they stand out like the Hulk in your living room. Not so with the sleek four-filter Sunbeam Air Purifier (1, \$199, [sunbeam.com.au](http://sunbeam.com.au)).

## Try to stay dry

With balmy breezes and moist air comes something less welcome: mould and dust. Dehumidifiers are your best bet to help reduce moisture levels for a year-round dry environment. De'Longhi's CFO5M Dehumidifier (\$349, [delonghi.com.au](http://delonghi.com.au)) is quiet enough to keep in the bedroom, and that's where you