

The health impact of cockroaches in the home



Cockroaches are more than merely a nuisance. They can cause serious illness and worsen existing health conditions while traditional removal methods can be dangerous.

Cockroaches in the home environment are a health hazard not only because of the risks posed by cockroach antigens to asthma sufferers, but also because some of the methods traditionally used to eliminate them cause additional health hazards.

Results from a nationwide study on factors that affect asthma in inner-city children show that cockroach allergen appears to worsen asthma symptoms more than either dust mite or pet allergens. Children with allergies to cockroach allergen who were exposed to cockroach allergen in their homes experienced more days with cough, wheezing and chest tightness, more nights with interrupted sleep, more missed school days, and more incidents of reduced or discontinued play activity. (Source: March 2005, Journal of Allergy and Clinical Immunology).

It's been known for more than a decade that cockroach exposure causes worsening of children's asthma. A 1997 study found that children with cockroach allergies, when exposed to cockroaches at home, suffered 3.4 times as many hospitalizations as other asthma patients, 78% more unscheduled visits to health care clinicians, more days of wheezing, more nights of struggling to breathe, more missed school. (Source: "The role of cockroach allergy and exposure to cockroach allergen in causing morbidity among inner-city children with asthma," New England Journal of Medicine, 1997; 336:1356-63)

Avoiding residential exposure to pesticides: alternatives

Care should also be taken to avoid residential exposure to pesticides, as these chemicals are carcinogenic health hazards. Many pesticides can also trigger asthma attacks and cause developmental disabilities. Pesticide sprays and foggers should not be used to control a pest problem. Not only will sprays and foggers leave a residue that is hazardous to human health, they also must be re-applied periodically. They are not effective against cockroaches and can undermine other pest control measures.

Baits and boric acid are safer, more preferable forms of treatment that limit the level of human exposure to pesticides.

Integrated Pest Management (IPM) is the more healthy and effective way to control cockroaches and eliminate the problem. Instead of just spraying pesticides, IPM uses non-chemical methods and minimal pesticides targeted to eliminating the pest and reducing exposure to any health hazards.

For additional information about environmental triggers of asthma, and the health effects of cockroaches, go to:
http://www.niehs.nih.gov/health/materials/asthma_and_its_environmental_triggers.pdf
http://www.afhh.org/hhel/bhe_cockroaches.htm
http://www.afhh.org/chil_ar/chil_ar_asthma.htm