



Healthy Living: Nothing to Sneeze At

Column

By Hanna Aronovich

Monday, 24 September 2007

Asthma-friendly certified pillows and mattress pads are gaining popularity as more than 50 million Americans suffer from asthma or allergies.

Nearly 50 million Americans are affected by asthma or allergies, the Asthma and Allergy Foundation of American (AAFA) reports. Itchy eyes, sneezing, coughing and a runny nose are just some allergy symptoms. And, unfortunately, “more American than ever before are saying they are suffering from allergies,” the AAFA states. “It is among the country’s most common, yet often overlooked, diseases.”

Designers might want to check whether clients suffer from allergies or asthma, and help them select products that minimize allergens. Home furnishing manufacturers, as well, should consider developing asthma-friendly products to address this market.

Allergy prevalence has been increasing since the early 1980s, and is the fifth-leading chronic disease in the United States among all ages and the third-most common illness among children under 18, AAFA reports. About 75 percent of allergy sufferers have indoor/outdoor allergies as their primary allergy, and the most common triggers are pollen, mold spores, dust mite allergens and dander.

However, proper disease management and avoidance of triggers can help people with asthma and allergies live healthy and active lives. The home can be a breeding ground for indoor allergens – especially pillows and bedding – which is why the AAFA has partnered with the Allergy Standards Limited (ASL) to develop an asthma-friendly certification program.

Through the program, which launched last year, products are tested over the course of 12 weeks. If they pass, they are certified and marked asthma-friendly. The AAFA explains that the asthma-friendly certification mark means “the product has been scientifically tested and proven to be more suitable for people with asthma and related allergic sensitivities.”

Experts say reducing exposure to dust mites should be part of everyone’s allergy and asthma management plan. “Bedding products are notorious for carrying dust mites and other asthma and allergy triggers,” says Mike Tringale, AAFA director of external affairs. “Until now, there has not been a reliable source of information about which products are best at helping to reduce exposure to allergens and irritants. All consumers have to do now is look for the asthma-friendly certified mark or visit www.asthmafriendly.com to find products that are scientifically proven to be more suitable for people with asthma and allergies.”

Rest Assured

At the end of last year, Hollander Home Fashions, the largest pillow manufacturer in the United States, rolled out its asthma-friendly certified pillows and mattress pads. Available at Bed, Bath & Beyond, the new Hollander products provide a barrier to the passage of allergens and are free from chemicals known to impact airway inflammation. They are machine washable so any allergen accumulating on the external surface can be easily removed.

“The introduction of these cutting-edge products underscore Hollander’s commitment to helping consumers live comfortably in their homes and lives,” CEO Jeff Hollander says. “We have been interested in targeting this increasing problem for some time and are pleased to be associated with [the AAFA and ASL]. The asthma-friendly testing protocols are rigorous, objective and can help to significantly reduce asthma and allergy triggers in the home.”

CleanRest – designed and manufactured by CleanBrands LLC – has also earned asthma-friendly certification on its bedding encasement. Introduced in April, CleanRest MicronOne technology completely blocks microtoxins, such as dust mites and their feces, mold and other harmful allergens, from affecting asthma and allergy sufferers while they sleep. It is the first encasement to be certified asthma-friendly.

“Most people are not aware that millions of microtoxins reside in everyone’s bedding, no matter how clean their home,” AAFA spokesperson Angel Waldron says. “The first thing doctors recommend for any allergy and asthma patient is to encase their mattress, pillows and bedding with protective covering, to completely isolate these harmful microtoxins, making the sleep environment as clean and healthy as possible.”

Each square inch of the CleanRest MicronOne fabric contains approximately 3 billion pores, each one no larger than one micron, creating a fine fabric weave that dust mites and other microtoxins can’t break through. Unlike vinyl casings that cause a hot and clammy night’s sleep, CleanRest encasements are breathable. The product is also water and stain proof.

CleanRest is the invention of Gary Goldberg, a third-generation textile scientist and entrepreneur who had a special motivation behind his work: His child suffered from nighttime breathing difficulties. “As a concerned parent, I wanted to protect my son’s sleep by creating the safest and healthiest sleep environment possible,” Goldberg says. “We tried other options but they were either ineffective or uncomfortable, prompting me to seek a better solution. CleanRest has made a positive difference in the quality of my entire family’s sleep.”

CleanRest isn’t just for allergy season. As mattresses and pillows age during the normal course of use, toxins build up naturally from the continuous breeding of microorganisms like dust mites and bed bugs as well as cockroaches, pet dander and the debris from other inhabitants which live in the home.

Eventually, these toxins reach dangerous levels and can have a serious affect on the quality and cleanliness of sleep. Over time, sleep debt can lead to heart disease, loss of cognitive skills or poor academic performance. From CleanRest, some disturbing facts:

- The average person spends one-third of his or her life in bed. This equals 220,000 hours over the course of a lifetime.
- A typical mattress can contain millions of dust mites.
- A single dust mite produces about 20 waste droppings each day, each small enough to get lodged in the lung’s bronchial tubes, resulting in asthma and skin irritation.
- Ten percent of the weight of a two-year-old pillow can be composed of dead mites and their droppings.

- Dust mites have eight legs, no eyes, no antennae, a mouth-like feature in front of the body and a tough, translucent shell, giving them a fearsome appearance.
- The highest mite densities occur in the humid summer months.
- One micron is very small. The face of a penny is 160,000 microns wide.

Walk All Over Allergens

Next year, certified vacuum cleaners, paints, flooring and other types of items will be available. ASL is currently testing and in the process of certifying asthma-friendly floor products. Until these products are available, adhering to these principles can minimize allergens:

- Avoid low-cost floorings, which may be major source of toxic substances in the environment, some of which are persistent organic pollutants.
- No off-gassing should occur.
- Select products that have been thoroughly tested by an independent laboratory or that have a third-party certification mark.
- Choose products that can be washed easily in order to keep surface and airborne allergens low.

Regular vacuuming can help minimize allergens and should be part of every allergen control plan, but using the right vacuum cleaner is important. ASL has developed standards for asthma-friendly vacuum cleaners, and Dyson upright vacuums were the first to earn the certification mark.

According to AAFA, allergen avoidance in the home should be an integral part of preventive care. Research shows that no single approach can reduce domestic allergen levels, so trigger reduction must be addressed through a combination of preventive measures, including using mattress encasements, special pillows, flooring, air filters and vacuuming with a high-quality cleaner to minimize total allergen levels in the home.