

# Holiday Allergies: Keep the Allergy Grinch Out of Your Stocking

By Dr. Mark Schecker

With the holiday season approaching, will you be giving a brightly gift-wrapped box of trouble to someone? If the recipient is an allergy sufferer, then you just might be.

This time of year it may be important to take a few minutes of thought and research before buying your gifts. Since approximately one out of every five individuals in the US suffers from allergies, many people on your gift list may be some of them. Foods, pets, jewelry, and even toys, are some of the things that may spell trouble for one of your loved ones.

Allergies are abnormal overreactions of our bodies' immune systems to substances normally thought to be harmless. Symptoms include fits of sneezing; itchy rashes, hives, diarrhea, wheezing and difficulty breathing. These symptoms may range from mild to severe and in a few instances may represent a life-threatening form of allergy called anaphylaxis.

Included among the Yule-tide foods and beverages that can trigger or aggravate allergic reactions in susceptible individuals are the eight most common food allergens, i.e. milk, eggs, peanuts, tree nuts (walnuts, cashews, etc.), fish, shellfish, soy, and wheat. It's always a good idea to call ahead to the host or hostess about your concerns or if you're in charge then inquire from your guests about any special dietary needs. The allergy sufferer can offer and should be encouraged to bring allergen-free dishes in order to prevent any accidental exposures that may cause an unwanted end to a cheerful event.

When choosing gifts, select fruit baskets that contain pesticide-free products. Take extra care when shopping for clothing and shoes. Don't forget about cosmetics and jewelry. Perfumes, colognes, soaps, and other cosmetics can cause irritant reactions as well as aggravate existing allergic problems. Limit other irritants like scented candles, deodorizers or potpourri. Bracelets, necklaces, rings, and earrings and other jewelry containing nickel can cause an itchy rash called contact dermatitis. Be careful of things labeled hypoallergenic because they might not be.

Of course, please don't forget about toys. Here, possible offenders include rubber products that can cause issues with a latex allergic child, or stuffed animals can cause problems for those sensitive to dust mites. Always consult with parents of children before making your selections.

Finally, beware of the live Christmas trees and the Yule logs burning in your fireplace. Trees, particularly pine trees, can give off an odor or contain mold that can give an asthma sufferer fits and the smoke from the fires can usually trigger as well. Artificial trees are usually adequate substitutes, but can also grow mold if not properly cared for or become irritating to those with

allergy and asthma if sprayed with chemical snow or pine scented oils. Gas fireplaces prevent exposure to aggravating smoke to which asthmatics are particularly sensitive.

So it's easy to see that with a little thoughtful planning it's reasonable to expect a happy and healthy Grinch-free holiday season for all.