Battling Respiratory Renegades

For years I glided through life without any worries about dust, mold, pollen, cats, or other sneeze-provoking entities. "What’s all this whining about allergies?" I used to think, when my sister was hit with hay fever or friends snuffed and snorted around me. But these days I can’t seem to escape the herd of allergens that antagonizes me with impunity. Several years ago I thought I could blame my congestive malaise on two kittens that showed up on the front porch, especially when my eyes started itching, my throat got scratchy, and my nose gushed like a broken river dam. My sinuses said stay away, but the little critters were too cute to ignore and soon seized control of the house without making a single mortgage payment.

However, I came to realize the cats weren’t the only plague. Other things began to make me sneeze and cough as well. Turn on the car’s heater or air conditioner—sneezing and hacking guaranteed. Leave the windows open at night and no need to set the alarm clock—an allergy attack will roust me in the morning. Here at the office, it’s just like the climate control kicks on, stand back and take cover.

What’s more, indoors or outdoors, who really knows what microbial renegades are rollicking in our respiratory systems? A breath of fresh air is rarely that today, especially considering all the contaminants wafting through our lives that take us beyond itching, sneezing, and hacking to headaches, nausea, and downright debilitating illnesses. As you can imagine, creating a healthy, congestion-free, clean-air environment is no small chore. Give “Breathing Room” (page 24) a read, and you’ll understand what we’re up against—and what the Syracuse Center of Excellence in Environmental and Energy Systems is doing to address problems created by unhealthy indoor air. Studies show that many of us spend 90 percent of our time indoors, and, according to John J. Vasselli, executive vice president of the New York Indoor Environmental Quality Center, our indoor air is far more dangerous than outdoor air. As Vasselli points out, indoor air pollution is an “incredible sleeping monster.” While we fear the wrath of such known hobgoblins as floating asbestos fibers and radon, many other insidious beasts lurk in our presence, including what researchers call “volatile organic compounds.” These gases, emitted from carpeting, cosmetics, paint, and other manufactured products, can be stirred up just walking across a room and sabotage good air with reckless abandon. While their ramifications may not be immediately apparent, there’s no doubt they affect our health and quality of life.

Our air may never be pristine, but anything we can do to improve it is worth pursuing—even if that means starting a bottled air craze akin to our bottled water boom. That may sound too absurd. But, then again, whoever thought breathing would become such a dangerous activity?

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