Dear Alice,

I need to know if roaches carry disease or pose any health risk. As a college student forced to live in dorms, encounters with these creatures occur on a daily basis. Am I at risk?

Thanks, Bummed about bugs

Answer

Dear Bummed about bugs,

You have good reason to be concerned when you hear the pitter-patter of little cucaracha feet in your residence hall. Cockroaches in your home have the potential to lead to two health issues: First, the little buggers can contaminate your environment by leaving droppings and bacteria scattered around your home, including antibiotic-resistant strains. These bacteria, like salmonella, can cause issues such as food poisoning [2]. Yikes! Second, cockroaches can leave behind tiny parts of their body that can settle in the dust in your home. These “cockroach allergens” are known as a major contributor to allergies, asthma, and other breathing problems. According to the American College of Allergy, Asthma, and Immunology [3], you might be experiencing a roach allergy if you have a stuffy nose that won’t go away, a skin rash, and year-round respiratory symptoms, like coughing, wheezing, and chest tightness (though other health issues could lead to these symptoms so you may want to check with a health care provider, just to be sure).

Once upon a time, cockroaches were thought to be a sign of poor housekeeping and slovenly living. Now, public health officials acknowledge that even the most fastidious housekeepers may have a run-in with roaches, especially if they live in warmer climates, large cities, or older buildings. These critters also prefer to hide in warm, moist places. Large, old buildings (including some schools’ residence halls!) are full of these sorts of nooks and crannies. In fact, you know how they say misery loves company? Well, roaches (a special type of misery) love company too: it’s estimated that if you see one roach, as many as 800 more could be hiding away somewhere nearby.

Researchers believe that people who are constantly exposed to roach allergens become
“sensitized” to the allergen. This means that people become more at risk for a serious reaction or asthma attack when they are in an area where roaches have been. This is an especially big issue for young children: sensitized kids in homes with lots of cockroaches have been found to have increased wheezing and more unplanned trips to the hospital or their health care provider for asthma. If a roach allergy or asthma is getting you down, you can work with a health care provider to explore using over-the-counter (OTC) allergy medications, getting a prescription for asthma medication, or trying out immunotherapy[^4] — a treatment that has shown promise in desensitizing people to cockroach allergens.

Your best bet in this situation might be to approach your resident advisor (RA), hall director, or hall council with your concerns about cockroaches and the health problems that they can trigger. One good resource that you could share with them is the National Pesticide Information Center[^5]. Your residential staff should be able to tell you (or find out) how the college is addressing the roach problem, and where you can go to make yourself heard to the administration.

While you’re waiting for your school, roommates, and/or Mother Nature to clean up their acts, here are a couple of tips for reducing roach-related asthma, allergies, and contamination:

- Keep your living areas, especially bedrooms, clutter-free and wipe up food crumbs or leftovers.
- Avoid leaving uncovered food out on kitchen tables or counters, and sweep the floor of food debris after cooking.
- Clamp down on leaky faucets and drains because cockroaches love dark, wet places.
- Never store garbage or other enticing cockroach treats (e.g., dry pet food, old newspapers) under the sink where it can get damp — instead, place it in a container that can be closed with a lid.
- Plug up or cover any holes or cracks in your floor or walls to make it harder for the roaches to sneak in.

Cockroaches are a bummer all the way around, but fortunately, you’re bigger and brainier. With a little information and perseverance, you can help get those roaches evicted from your residence hall.

Alice!

Category: General Health[^6]
Environmental Health[^7]

### Related questions

- Bed bugs go ‘chomp’ in the night[^8]
- Toxic mold around the house[^9]
- Breathing easier in the big city[^10]
- No one cares about drunken, messy hall mates, or do they?[^11]
- Meningitis: Should I get the vaccine?[^12]
- Safe, non-toxic way to get rid of roaches?[^13]