

# Your Health

by Dr. Paul Roumeliotis

## Humidifiers: To Use Them or Not?

Many people wonder whether or not they should be using humidifiers in their homes. The answer is not very clear-cut, but let me try to explain. We need to have a certain level of humidity in the air we breathe in through our nose. The “normal” or “ideal” indoor humidity level is about 40-45%. Humidity levels over 45% can indeed be harmful, both directly and indirectly.

In asthmatic individuals, for example, high humidity may make the asthma symptoms worse. Indirectly, high humidity affects our health adversely by promoting mould growth and dust mites. Dust mites are microscopic insects that live in dust found in upholstered furniture and they thrive on high humidity. Dust mites are considered to be very important irritants in asthma and in chronic nasal allergies. Moulds grow in the presence of high humidity and have been associated with causing or worsening asthma and other respiratory symptoms as well as other health problems.

### How can you determine what the level of humidity is in your house?

Special “hygrometers” that look like thermometers are readily available at any hardware or department store. These instruments can help monitor the humidity level at home. Under normal conditions, and if the humidity levels are normal, a humidifier is not necessary. On the other hand, in the presence of high humidity (over 45%), and especially if a child has chronic asthma and/or respiratory allergies, the humidity needs to be decreased by using a dehumidifier. Low humidity is not good either as it dries up our respiratory tract, including the nose. In the case of low humidity, a central humidifier may help to bring up the humidity and maintain it at normal levels.

Still following me? Well, the issue can get even more complicated. We know that one of the treatments of a cold is humidity. So, in this case, extra humidification for a short time may help, even if the humidity level in the room is normal. However, in asthmatics I do not generally recommend extra humidification even during

a cold. Although humidifiers may help a person with a cold, they should not routinely be used in asthmatic persons, unless discussed with your doctor.

Presuming that one uses a humidifier, there are several issues. One is *cold mist versus warm*. I prefer cold, as it is safer. Warm mists may accidentally spill and scald a child. Next, *vaporizer versus humidifier*. In general, I do not think there is much difference between the two.

### What about adding menthol (lotion or rub) to vaporizers?

This is not recommended as some studies have suggested that the associated fumes may be potentially toxic. On a final note, a potential problem relates to not cleaning the filters frequently or adequately. Moisture left in the humidifier (or vaporizer) can harbor mould and bacteria. An improperly maintained or unclean humidifier may be actually spreading germs and harming your family.

*Dr. Paul Roumeliotis is the Medical Officer of Health for the Eastern Ontario Health Unit and Assistant Professor of Pediatrics, McGill University. © Dr. Paul Roumeliotis*