

Humidifiers

By J. Allen Meadows, MD

HUMIDIFIERS

Although many physicians recommend humidifiers to help improve various respiratory conditions in many patients and believe they are beneficial, the only scientifically proven condition for which humidifiers are helpful is croup. Mold and bacteria rapidly multiply in the moist environment of the humidifier which subsequently are sprayed into the room and can cause acute respiratory symptoms including running nose, nasal congestion, cough and wheezing. Often times humidifiers are used to treat these symptoms and can actually serve to perpetuate them creating a vicious cycle. If you decide to use a humidifier, it is important that it be cleaned on a routine basis, typically once to twice a week.

Cool mist humidifiers are easy to clean. We recommend taking the humidifier to a well-ventilated area or outside. The spout should be plugged with an old sock. The humidifier should be filled to the fill line with water and one to two tablespoons of household bleach added. The humidifier should then be turned on (again, remembering that the spout is covered) and bleach solution allowed to circulate in the mechanism of the humidifier. This will serve to kill bacteria and molds which live in areas that would otherwise be inaccessible during routine cleaning. The humidifier is run for two or five minutes. This solution should be poured out and replaced with fresh water. Again, run the humidifier for two to three minutes to rinse the humidifier of bleach. This procedure should be repeated several times until the odor of bleach is no longer present, since bleach is bad for the respiratory system and may cause staining of carpeting and other furniture in your home. Generally, using vinegar instead of household bleach is considered a less effective means of killing bacteria and molds. The attached sheet gives guidelines for cleaning your cool mist humidifier. If you have a steam vaporizer, all the parts should be cleaned thoroughly in a dilute solution of household bleach. Ultrasonic humidifiers are more difficult to clean, and the manufacturers instructions should be consulted prior to cleaning with any cleaning solution.

Cleaning of Cool Mist Humidifiers at Home

1. Clean equipment in an area away from the individual with a respiratory problem, in a well ventilated area, preferably outside.
2. Wash unit completely with detergent (This may be done less often than weekly).
3. Rinse well under running tap water. Be careful that no water gets into the motor.
4. Plug the spout with an old sock or the disposable cloth. Fill the unit with water and add 1-2 tablespoons of household bleach, and allow the humidifier to run 2 to 5 minutes.

5. Rinse well and operate for 2-3 minutes with clean tap water.
6. Empty humidifier and repeat step 5 until the strong bleach odor is no longer present
7. Pour out tap water and fill to appropriate level. Distilled water is preferable but tap water may be used.

NOTE: WHEN THE WATER LEVEL IS LOW, ALWAYS DISCARD WATER REMAINING IN THE HUMIDIFIER BEFORE REFILLING WITH DISTILLED WATER!

WHEN PERSON WITH A RESPIRATORY PROBLEM HAS, OR IS BELIEVED TO HAVE, A RESPIRATORY INFECTION, THE HUMIDIFIER and /or VAPORIZER SHOULD BE CLEANED DAILY!