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Cockroaches linked with asthma

A five year US study of asthma among poor people has pointed the finger at the common cockroach. The researchers found "huge levels" of cockroach antigens in many of the households they surveyed. Admission rates in the US for asthma are nearly six times higher among poor people.

Previously, researchers have identified many reasons for the higher rates of complications: housing with poor ventilation, lack of doctors in neighbourhoods, and inability to pay for common drugs used to treat asthma. But this new, multifaceted study of asthma among poor people, which is supported by the National Institutes of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (NIAID), is focusing on *Blattella germanica*, the common cockroach.

Allergy specialists have been teaching their colleagues that dust mites are the major household sourced antigen associated with asthma, and this may be so in richer as well as poorer homes. But among poor people, researchers have found that the proteins of cockroach faeces and carcasses are more antigenic than in richer homes.

Workers in the national cooperative inner city asthma study tested 1528 children under 10 and visited the homes of about half of them. "There were huge levels of cockroach antigens, much higher than has ever been reported," said Dr Peyton Eggleston of Johns Hopkins University.

Moreover, it was found that allergies to cockroach antigen were directly associated with the amount of antigen measured, which, if verified, may explain why the prevalence of asthma is so high in poorer homes.

The discovery that cockroach antigens are a major trigger for asthma helps to explain why asthma is becoming more common even as cigarette smoking and air pollution are decreasing.—JOHN ROBERTS, *North American editor, BMJ*