

# the right chemistry

## SILK MIGHT PREVENT NIGHTTIME FROM BECOMING MITE TIME

I've long had a special appreciation for silk, going back to the days when I first started practising magic as a hobby.

One of the first effects any amateur magician learns is to "vanish" a silk kerchief by stuffing it into an apparently bare hand. From this you progress to magically changing the colour of a silk kerchief and, if you are really devoted, to making it dance in your hand.

Actually, to be honest, these days we use polyester instead of silk. It's a matter of cost, but nobody refers to the vanish of a "polyester." It is always a "silk."

Because of my special relationship with silk, my ears immediately perked up when a friend asked for my opinion about SmartSilk.

It sounded like some new magic trick but, it turned out, SmartSilk offered a different type of magic. It was the trade name for a line of mattress covers, pillowcases and comforters that were advertised to reduce the risk of allergies and asthma triggered by various allergens commonly found in bedding. There was more. The special wicking properties of the machine-washable silk were said to transfer heat and humidity from sleeping people, making for a more comfortable sleep—especially for menopausal women plagued by night sweats.

When I asked the Montreal company that had developed SmartSilk for more informa-

*“Less moisture for dust mites means more comfort.”*

tion, I sure got it. Reams of it. And I got a bonus—a full set of SmartSilk bedding to try.

Since I had never slept with silk before, I was game.

So what are these allergens in bedding that have spawned a host of protective products such as SmartSilk?

Well, here's the yucky tale: The fact is, you never sleep alone. You sleep with bugs. Lots of them. In fact, probably several hundred thousand. They're called dust mites, and they just love mattresses and pillows.

Why? Because here in the comfort of a warm and humid environment they can dine on a buffet of dust mite delights. Human skin flakes are a particular delicacy.

And they're sloughed off in large quantities, especially when there is hectic activity on top of the sheets. Animal dander is also appreciated. Sleeping with a cat or dog can turn your mattress into a luxury resort for mites.

Now, don't go looking for the bugs unless you are equipped with a magnifying glass. And you will probably not like what you see, unless, of course, you enjoy watching tiny eight-legged arachnids cavorting with reckless abandon. They're eating, mating (likely far more often than their meal source on top of the sheets), laying eggs and, worst of all, defecating.

And therein lies the real problem. Dust mite excreta are loaded with allergens that can cause human misery. To digest the organic detritus with which we so abundantly supply them, the bugs produce digestive enzymes, remnants of which find their way into their poop. The microscopic droppings readily es-



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cape from bedding to torment the roughly 20 per cent of the population sensitive to mite enzymes.

These poor souls itch, their eyes water, their noses run, they develop eczema, and they sneeze. As congestion builds up, they may even snore.

They need help.

Mites really frolic in a moist environment, so keeping the relative humidity under 50 per cent is desirable, but this may not be easy to do.

The best bet is to encase the comforter, mattress and pillows in mite-proof covers making mite entry and exit difficult.

Vinyl is very effective, but not comfortable to sleep on. Tightly woven blends of cotton and polyester work well, but cotton and silk may be even better, given that silk does not store moisture effectively.

A silk comforter will, like down, wick moisture from a sleeper. But unlike down, it will dissipate it into the surrounding air instead of retaining it.

Less moisture for dust mites means more comfort for people. Producers of silk products also suggest that dust mites actually find silk an inhospitable environment and that the bugs are less likely to set up housekeeping inside a comforter made with silk fibre, however, I can't find any study that corroborates this.

Of course, dust mites are not the only source of allergens in bedding.

Moulds, dyes, flame retardants and processing chemicals like formaldehyde can also trigger reactions in sensitive people. The only way to know if bedding is a source of any of these allergens is to run a battery of tests.

That is exactly what Allergy Standards Limited, an Irish company, does. If a product meets its standards, it certifies it to be "asthma and allergy friendly."

Apparently, SmartSilk is the first natural silk bedding product to receive such certification.

This does not imply a 100-per-cent guarantee against allergic reactions, but it does mean that the product is made from materials that have a low potential to irritate or provoke allergic misery.

Since I'm not bothered by night-time allergies or menopausal symptoms, I can't relay any personal experience about their alleviation.

But there is something I can vouch for—the comfort of the silk comforter. It's light and the fill doesn't bunch up. I can't quite explain it scientifically, but somehow it keeps you warm and dry while staying cool to the touch.

And now that I'm equipped with SmartSilk, I mite even sleep better.

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