

Allergic reactions



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I read with interest recently that Dubai Hospital has opened a specialist clinic for allergy diagnosis, treatment and prevention. Allergies are nothing new of course, but there seems to be mounting evidence that some types are on the increase and many countries now have hospitals and clinics to provide expertise and specialist care for the worst sufferers.

An allergy is basically an exaggerated reaction from a body's immune system to a foreign substance. These substances are called allergens and typically include pollen, dust mites, 'pet dander' and certain foods such as nuts, shellfish, milk, eggs and wheat. In non-allergic people these substances are regarded by the body as harmless and ignored, but for others they are identified and part of the immune system reacts.

Although an allergic reaction might sometimes appear immediate, research has shown that there must have been some prior contact with the allergen. This period of sensitisation can range from months to years. There is also strong evidence to show that the propensity to develop allergies is hereditary. Interestingly though, children do not always develop the same

allergies as their parents. Much also remains unknown as to why some allergic reactions are more severe than others.

Perhaps the most commonly known allergy is that of 'hay fever' but this is actually a bit of a misnomer. The phrase was coined when it was noticed that the typical symptoms of a runny nose, sneezing and itchy eyes occurred around harvesting time. The phrase has now stuck but the cause is not hay and neither does it cause fever. The more correct term – allergic rhinitis – can be caused by a variety of substances. Seasonal rhinitis is generally due to pollen, the lighter forms of which can be carried on the wind and which, when it finds its way into the membranes that line the respiratory tract, can cause an allergic reaction. Year round allergic rhinitis however is more likely to be due to things like pet dander and dust mites. The latter, along with contributing factors such as pollution, is almost certainly the most common cause in the Middle East, particularly in coastal areas where the combination of temperature and humidity creates an environment where dust mites are known to thrive. Asthma is another condition that is often related to allergies.

There are various theories as to why certain types of allergies are on the increase but most point towards modern society. Studies have shown for example that higher levels of carbon dioxide create an increase in the growth of weeds whose pollen then triggers allergies. Others, such as the commonly cited 'hygienic hypothesis' essentially argue that improvements in public health including the extensive use of antibiotics, antibacterial cleansers and processes such as water cleansing have made us "too clean". Consequently, this has altered the way our immune systems react to allergens. Whatever the reasons though, thankfully the most common allergic symptoms can now be treated with antihistamines, decongestants, steroids, Leukotriene Receptor Blockers, and in the

case of more severe reactions (anaphylaxis), with epinephrine.

Taking practical steps to control exposure to allergies however can often be the most effective. Thus, avoiding going out when the pollen count is high, keeping away from cats, and reducing dust around the home are all to be recommended. In regions like the Middle East where the number of nasal allergy sufferers is rising, there are simple measures that everyone can adopt. These include regular vacuuming, reducing humidity with air conditioning and dehumidifiers, and in the case of beds – where dust mites are known to thrive – by washing linen regularly at 60 degrees and using mattress covers specially designed to address this problem.

Of further interest to some may be the results of a 2004 study by Kingston University in the UK. Scientists there discovered that whilst the warm, damp conditions created in an occupied bed are ideal for dust mites to thrive, they are much less likely to survive when moisture is in short supply. Thus, something as simple as allowing your bed to dry out by not making it in the morning can actually have a positive effect for those who suffer with allergic rhinitis and asthma. A nice thought to leave you with! **MEH**

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