

## **When Should I See an Allergist?**

Asthma and other allergic diseases are two of the most common health problems. Approximately 50 million Americans have asthma, hay fever or other allergy-related conditions.

Some allergy problems — such as a mild case of hay fever — may not need any treatment. Sometimes allergies can be controlled with the occasional use of an over-the-counter medication. However, sometimes allergies can interfere with day-to-day activities or decrease the quality of life. Allergies can even be life threatening.

## **The Allergist Treats Asthma and Allergies**

An allergist is a physician who specializes in the diagnosis and treatment of asthma and other allergic diseases. The allergist is specially trained to identify the factors that trigger asthma or allergies. Allergists help people treat or prevent their allergy problems. After earning a medical degree, the allergist completes a three-year residency-training program in either internal medicine or pediatrics. Next the allergist completes two or three more years of study in the field of allergy and immunology. You can be certain that your doctor has met these requirements if he or she is certified by the American Board of Allergy and Immunology.

## **What Is an Allergy?**

One of the marvels of the human body is that it can defend itself against harmful invaders such as viruses or bacteria. But sometimes the defenses are too aggressive and harmless substances such as dust, molds or pollen are mistakenly identified as dangerous. The immune system then rallies its defenses, which include several chemicals to attack and destroy the supposed enemy. In the process, some unpleasant and, in extreme cases, life-threatening symptoms may be experienced in the allergy-prone individual.

## **The Cause of Allergic Reactions**

There are hundreds of ordinary substances that can trigger allergic reactions. Among the most common are plant pollens, molds, household dust (dust mites), cockroaches, pets, industrial chemicals, foods, medicines, feathers and insect stings. These triggers are called "allergens."

## **Who Develops Asthma or Allergies?**

Asthma and allergies can affect anyone, regardless of age, gender, race or socioeconomic factors. While it's true that asthma and allergies are more common in children, they can occur for the first time at any age. Sometimes allergy symptoms start in childhood, disappear for many years and then start up again during adult life.

Although the exact genetic factors are not yet understood, there is a hereditary tendency to asthma and allergies. In susceptible people, factors such as hormones, stress, smoke, perfume or other environmental irritants also may play a role.

### **Types of Allergy Problems**

An allergic reaction may occur anywhere in the body but usually appears in the nose, eyes, lungs, lining of the stomach, sinuses, throat and skin. These are places where special immune system cells are stationed to fight off invaders that are inhaled, swallowed or come in contact with the skin.

**Allergic Rhinitis (Hay Fever).** Allergic rhinitis is a general term used to describe the allergic reactions that take place in the nose. Symptoms may include sneezing, congestion, runny nose, and itching of the nose, the eyes and/or the roof of the mouth. When this problem is triggered by pollens or outdoor molds, during the Spring, Summer or Fall, the condition is often called "hay fever." When the problem is year-round, it might be caused by exposure to house dust mites, household pets, indoor molds, or allergens at school or in the workplace.

**Asthma.** Asthma symptoms occur when airway muscle spasms block the flow of air to the lungs and/or the linings of the bronchial tubes become inflamed. Excess mucus may clog the airways. An asthma attack is characterized by labored or restricted breathing, a tight feeling in the chest, coughing and/or wheezing. Sometimes a chronic cough is the only symptom. Asthma trouble can cause only mild discomfort or it can cause life-threatening attacks in which breathing stops altogether.

**Contact Dermatitis/Skin Allergies.** Contact dermatitis, eczema and hives are skin conditions that can be caused by allergens and other irritants. Often the reaction may take hours or days to develop, as in the case of poison ivy. The most common allergic causes of rashes are medicines, insect stings, foods, animals and chemicals used at home or work. Allergies may be aggravated by emotional stress.

**Anaphylaxis.** Anaphylaxis is a rare, potentially fatal allergic reaction that affects many parts of the body at the same time. The trigger may be an insect sting, a food (such as peanuts) or a medication. Symptoms may include:

- Vomiting or diarrhea
- A dangerous drop in blood pressure
- Redness of the skin and/or hives
- Difficulty breathing
- Swelling of the throat and/or tongue
- Loss of consciousness

Frequently these symptoms start without warning and get worse rapidly. At the first sign of an anaphylactic reaction, the affected person must go immediately to the closest Emergency Room or call 911.

### **When To See an Allergist**

Often, the symptoms of asthma or allergies develop gradually over time.

Allergy sufferers may become used to frequent symptoms such as sneezing, nasal congestion or wheezing. With the help of an allergist, these symptoms usually can be prevented or controlled with major improvement in quality of life.

Effectively controlling asthma and allergies requires planning, skill and patience. The allergist, with his or her specialized training can develop a treatment plan for your individual condition. The goal will be to enable you to lead a life that is as normal and symptom-free as possible.

A visit to the allergist might include:

- Allergy testing. The allergist will usually perform tests to determine what allergens are involved.
- Prevention education. The most effective approach to treating asthma or allergies is to avoid the factors that trigger the condition in the first place. Even when it is not possible to completely avoid allergens, an allergist can help you decrease exposure to allergens.
- Medication prescriptions. A number of new and effective medications are available to treat both asthma and allergies.
- Immunotherapy (Allergy Shots). In this treatment, patients are given injections every week or two of some or all of the allergens that cause their allergy problems. Gradually the injections get stronger and stronger. In most cases, the allergy problems get less and less over time.

You should see an allergist if:

- Your allergies are causing symptoms such as chronic sinus infections, nasal congestion or difficulty breathing.
- You experience hay fever or other allergy symptoms several months out of the year.
- Antihistamines and over-the-counter medications do not control your allergy symptoms or create unacceptable side effects, such as drowsiness.
- Your asthma or allergies are interfering with your ability to carry on day-to-day activities.
- Your asthma or allergies decrease the quality of your life.
- You are experiencing warning signs of serious asthma such as:
  - You sometimes have to struggle to catch your breath.
  - You often wheeze or cough, especially at night or after exercise.
  - You are frequently short of breath or feel tightness in your chest.
  - You have previously been diagnosed with asthma, and you have frequent asthma attacks even though you are taking asthma medication.

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