

THE ALLERGY & ASTHMA CLINIC

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NEWSLETTER

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How to Handle Spring Allergies

It's Springtime again and all across the Bay Area, people with allergies are sniffing, sneezing, and generally suffering from a surfeit of spring allergies. Recently, WebMD published an extensive Q & A session with nationally acclaimed allergist, Jordan S. Josephson, MD, to get the latest news on causes, treatments, and home remedies for allergic reactions. Here are some highlights:

Q: Most people think of allergy symptoms as just sneezing and itchy eyes. But what they don't realize is that the symptoms and health effects can be far worse.

A: Absolutely. What starts as simple itching and sneezing can turn into something much more serious. As your allergies worsen, your nasal passages and sinuses become swollen and congested. This can lead to a sinus infection. The infected mucus draining from your sinuses can drip into your stomach and, if you have gastro esophageal reflux disease (GERD), cause symptoms to act up. And if this mucus drips down the trachea into your lungs, it

can irritate your lungs and your airways.

If you have asthma, it can flare up and lead to bronchitis. If the mucus drips over your eustachian tube, the tube that connects your middle ear to the outside of your head, the tube becomes clogged and you can't equalize the pressure in your ear. This can lead to ear problems, such as decreased hearing from excess pressure in the ear, ear pain, or even an ear infection.

Sleep apnea, caused by a blockage anywhere from the tip of the nose to the back of the throat, is another complication of allergies or sinus problems, leading to sleep deprivation and chronic fatigue. Sleep apnea can cause heart disease if it's not treated; in fact, it's the No. 1 cause for heart attack and stroke while sleeping.

Bottom line: Allergies, although usually considered a quality of life issue that makes us feel lousy, can also be very serious. People have anaphylactic reactions to both environmental and food allergies, and you can end up with a really bad asthma attack and possibly die. It's much more than a stuffy nose, and if the symptoms are

not improving with simple measures, you should see an experienced sinus and allergy specialist.

Q: What's new in allergy treatment that excites you?

A: Eastern and Western medicine are joining forces. So now, irrigation with neti pots and sinus irrigating units are becoming more mainstream. This is really important because these wash out the allergens that get in your nose. Also exciting are new intranasal antihistamine nasal sprays that work very well for many patients. They can be used in addition to oral antihistamines as well as nasal irrigation and nasal steroid sprays. Also, the newer generation antihistamines have non drowsy formulations and are therefore better for those who need them at school and at work. The older versions tend to make most people sleepy.

Q: What about air purifiers? There's been some controversy about whether they really help people with allergies (please see next page)

What's your take?

A: I think air purifiers are great. But you have to understand that if you

have an air purifier in the bedroom, it's only going to clean the air around a perimeter of a few feet and you still have to deal with the air when you leave your house, which is polluted. However, for bedrooms and work areas, patients (often) find them very effective. Don't forget that it is important to regularly change the filters.

Q: The rates of both allergies and asthma have climbed in recent decades. Does current research tell us why?

A: All upper and lower respiratory tract diseases are increasing. One reason is that global warming is causing allergens to peak, so pollen counts are higher each year as a result. People who are sensitive to pollen will have worse allergies.

Another reason is that "super infections" are on the rise because people take antibiotics when they don't need them or don't finish all their prescribed antibiotics. The result is more resistant organisms that cause worse sinus infections -- you have these "super organisms", as they call them.

We also have an increase in pollution, with so many more cars on the road and so many more factories. Pollution doesn't cause

allergies, but it does cause inflammation and swelling in the nose and sinuses and worsens allergy symptoms. Common

irritants include cigarette smoke and burning coal in addition to car and factory exhaust.

Q: The American Academy of Allergy, Asthma, and Immunology estimates that some 40% of all American children suffer from allergic rhinitis. What are some of the special concerns about children with allergies?

A: Certainly children are most affected by seasonal allergies so if your kid has allergies be sure to take care of it early on. Kids can suffer from stuffy noses, postnasal drip, coughs, hoarseness, headaches, sore throats, and clogged ears and ear infections. Often these are written off as normal but, frequently, they are not and need to be cared for before the situation worsens. Should the obstruction get really bad, children can suffer from breathing problems and sleep apnea; both can cause significant fatigue and lead to other conditions if left untreated, such as heart disease.

Allergies that lead to chronic sinusitis and possibly swollen tonsils and adenoids also need to be addressed.

Q: What about medications? Parents have so many concerns about medicating their children. What does the

research show about what's safe -- and not safe -- to give children with allergies?

A: There are now new warnings on decongestants and, since long-term usage may cause problems, even heart problems, I recommend parents use decongestants very sparingly because they can have significant side effects.

As far as antihistamines go, several on the market are nonsedating and don't cause fatigue; I think those are good for children. They can play an important role in controlling allergy symptoms. I think allergy shots are great for kids. You're going to need a commitment -- even a year, maybe two or three - - and you'll need to be followed closely by an allergy specialist. I've seen kids do very well. When they're first allergic, they're miserable. But two or three years later, they are feeling terrific and come allergy season, they're just not feeling it. Again, getting to the problem early helps thwart allergies.

The benefits are there for adults, too. There are drawbacks -- some people don't have the time for the weekly shots; others are afraid of needles. In Europe, doctors are giving drops under the tongue, but that's not widely used in the U.S. even though many medical studies do show they are also very effective and very safe.