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Title: Something in the air

Lead: If you suffer from allergies, avoiding your triggers and learning how to boost your immune system is the key to a better lifestyle.

By Stephanie Gartelmann (now Oley)

For allergy sufferers, there are some words guaranteed to bring a tear to the eye (and a twitch to the nose). Springtime. Cat. Shagpile carpet. And if you can identify your triggers this well, you're still ahead of other sufferers. Living well with allergies means knowing how to manage them: avoiding allergens you are susceptible to, and taking the steps to build up your body's immune response.

In medical terms, an allergy is caused by an overactive immune system, when there's an IgE antibody-mediated mast cell response to an external irritant, resulting in the release of histamines. Inflammation follows. Membranes of the nose, throat and eyes puff up during an outbreak of hay fever. The lung's bronchioles swell during an asthma attack. Areas of skin inflame for eczema and dermatitis sufferers. The skin breaks out in hives for those sensitive to chemicals or food chemicals. These are just some examples.

Who's holding the tissues?

Generally, allergy sufferers fall into one of two categories: those who have inherited allergies genetically, and others whose symptoms were brought on by early childhood exposure to allergens such as dust mites.

Allergy-sufferers figure prominently in Australia. In the 2004-05 Australian National Health Survey, 10 percent of us were asthmatics (2 million individuals) and 16 percent suffered from hay fever and allergic rhinitis (more than 3 million). Children and young people were greatest affected, with 12 percent of 16 to 24-year-olds being asthmatics and 19 percent suffering from hay fever. Nearly 4 percent of Australians had skin allergies such as eczema. The good news is that these incidences did not change much from the preceding survey, in 2001. Food allergies are another story – see side box.

Three serious triggers

Many unresolved questions remain in the science of allergy diagnosis and cure, but the following factors affect most respiratory, dermatological and digestive allergies.

1. Dusty homes and gardens

Dust mites, household dust (including from building materials), mould, pollens and animal hairs are common allergens, and our lifestyles encourage their presence. According to paediatrician Dr Velencia Soutter, from the Royal Prince Alfred Hospital's Allergy Unit, we do less housework than ever, carpet our homes and plant pollen-shedding trees. "If you go to Asia or the Mediterranean you'll always see women dusting everything and hanging the bedding out. But we have lost that culture in Australia," she says. On the flipside, Soutter believes that respiratory allergies have stabilised since more homes now favour wooden flooring over carpet.

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2. Sedentary, indoor lifestyles

A growing lack of Vitamin D is suspected of lowering our bodies' immune systems and their ability to cope with allergenic nasties that are airborne, touched or ingested. "More people than you'd think have insufficient Vitamin D," Soutter says. Even those with moderate daily outdoor activity are at risk, while office workers – who rarely venture outside during daytime – are obvious candidates. Australian adults were also more overweight or obese in 2005 compared to 2001, and drank at riskier levels. "The more overweight you are, the harder it is for your body to develop a healthy immune system," Soutter notes.

3. Chemicals in food

Food intolerances – which are different to full-blown food allergies – are known to exacerbate allergic responses in susceptible individuals. Such symptoms range from a general feeling of ill health to an outbreak of hives, headaches or stomach and bowel problems. Again, Soutter questions dietary lifestyles. "Food has drug-like properties, but many people don't seem to realise this," she says. For example, we consume many foods containing salicylates, amines and glutamate, all naturally occurring chemicals that can cause inflammatory, breathing or digestive disorders. Glutamate, a building block of proteins, is known to enhance flavour, which is why glutamate-rich foods such as tomatoes, cheeses and meat extracts are used in so much cooking. "If you have a slight susceptibility to these, you are at risk of worsening your allergies," warns Soutter. "Half of the children I see here wouldn't be here if it wasn't for all the tomato, fruit juice and instant noodles they ate."

Getting a grip on allergy

Recognising there is a problem is step one, and seeking professional advice in managing symptoms is step two in allergy treatment. Correct management of children's allergies is particularly important. Most major teaching hospitals have a specialised allergy unit, and your GP will also be able to refer you to a specialist.

At a tailored allergy centre, patients usually undergo an elimination diet and other tests with the nutritionist and may receive advice on environmental medicine (avoiding contact with certain environmental allergens and toxins). Medicines may or may not be prescribed, and patients will also be able to discuss nutritional medicine and supplements, traditional Chinese medicine, herbs and changes in lifestyle.

Skin tests are also commonly undertaken. Small pricks are made on the inner arm and clinical forms of certain substances applied; the skin shows marked inflammation where allergens were applied. Less common is blood testing, which is used to determine how antibodies are produced in response to certain allergens.

Natural healing

There's a slew of natural methods you can use to relieve or limit the effects of allergies. Blackmores has naturopath advisory service for those trying to find someone in their area who can offer tailored advice, while the website also offers good basic information.

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- Hay fever

During hay fever season, limit your time outdoors in windy conditions, and shut windows. Out of hay fever season, air your home as much as possible. To minimise dust mite build-up, store books, papers and clothes away from main living areas or keep them behind cupboard doors. Use dust mite protectors on mattresses and blankets.

Choose herbal remedies that boost the immune system and inhibit histamine production, says Siobhan Jordan, advisory naturopath at Blackmores. Good examples are albizia, perilla and baical skullcap (not to be confused with regular skullcap), the last two often administered by Chinese herbalists. Horseradish and fenugreek are known decongestants and will help dry up mucus; both can be taken in concentrated pill form. Jordan adds that there's also been a recent revival of the Neti pot, an ancient Indian Ayurvedic form of nasal irrigation using a saline solution.

- Eczema

The most important step is to first identify the allergen. This could be a substance like dishwashing liquid, in the case of contact dermatitis, or factors such as foods, airborne particles or hereditary susceptibility in the case of atopic dermatitis. As above, herbal prescriptions such as albizia, perilla and baical skullcap can help soothe the condition, along with Omega 3 and Omega 6 supplements. For topical treatments, choose ultra-gentle products that also moisturise and soothe, such as jojoba oil.

- Food allergy

New parents are advised to avoid known allergen until certain stages of a child's life. For example, eggs are not recommended for babies younger than nine months, milk not until 12 months and peanuts not until three years. By waiting until the child is older, potential allergy sufferers get the chance to build up their immunity first.

[BREAKOUT]

A mouthful of trouble

Food allergy outbreaks have soared in recent years. Dr Velencia Soutter, a paediatrician specialising in food allergies at RPAH's Allergy Unit, says that while egg, milk and other food allergies haven't increased in number, she is astounded at the growth in nut allergies. The cause is still much debated, but Soutter suggests that modern diets play a large role. "Foods that were never before eaten in large volumes are now eaten throughout the day, and in large volumes," she says. Peanut butter, for example, is a concentrated product unlike anything eaten in previous generations. "You can become allergic to something just through initial skin contact, if you have sensitive skin," she says.

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