



It's The Sneezin' Season

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Over 44 million Americans suffer from allergy, and parents know that springtime brings high pollen counts bothersome symptoms for their allergic children.

According to pediatric allergist Dr. Mandel Sher, "this year has been particularly problematic for children with allergies due to greater than normal amounts of Oak and other tree pollens in the air, as well as our unusual weather last month" Allergic individuals overreact to the millions of foreign irritants normally found in our environment (dust mites, pet dander, pollen, molds, insects, pollutants, etc.).

These irritants, called "allergens," are harmless to most of us. Yet for some unknown reason, the immune system of allergic children and adults considers these innocent particles dangerous and reacts by producing antibodies against them. Hay fever, allergy's most common form, develops when an inhaled allergen lands on the sufferer's nasal membranes. This stimulates the immune system causing an allergic chain reaction resulting in the release of symptom producing chemical mediators.

The most common offending pollen originates from trees during this time of the year. Most allergic children living in Florida, however, have problems year round due to their sensitivity to dust mites and mold spores.

Children with hay fever ("allergic rhinitis") usually have a persistent clear nasal discharge with sneezing, sniffing, watery eyes, scratchy throat and nasal itching. The children frequently perform the "allergic salute", which is the vertical rubbing of the nose to alleviate nasal itching and obstruction.

Other symptoms include eye blinking, itchy runny eyes, restless sleep, headaches, noisy breathing, snoring at night, and abdominal pain from postnasal drip. Physical examination is usually normal except for congested nasal membranes and occasionally dark circles under the eyes, so called "allergic shiners."

Hyperactive behavior is generally not a sign of nasal allergy. The allergic symptoms occur at the same time each year and the ailment is frequently inherited, so other family members will also have symptoms.

To some allergic children the stuffy or runny nose is only a nuisance, but to others the condition has a significant impact on their health. The congestion and obstruction caused by ongoing nasal allergies can lead to the development of recurring ear and sinus infections, as well as triggering asthma attacks.

"Evidence continues to accumulate that asthma, particularly in warm climates like Florida, has a significant allergic basis," added Dr. Sher. "In my practice I treat many children whose active nasal symptoms activated an underlying asthmatic condition. The saying 'an open nose is a happy nose' is true for many reasons."

The diagnosis of allergies can frequently be made by both history and physical exam. While there are certain screening tests available to confirm the presence of allergy, the skin test still remains the pediatric allergist's most important test. "In the proper hands allergy skin testing is of minimal discomfort, cost-effective and can be completed within an hour and a half," notes Dr. Sher. Once the diagnosis of allergy

is confirmed either by history, physical exam, or skin tests, treatment includes avoidance of the allergens and prescribed medications.

It is impossible to eliminate all of the allergens that may cause a child's symptoms, but parents should remove as many of the culprits as possible. House dust is the most common cause of year round allergy, and the most important component of house dust is the dust mite. These microscopic insect-like creatures thrive in ordinary house dust and are especially prevalent in Florida, due to the mite's high growth rate in our heat and humidity. A female mite can lay up to 50 eggs at a time, with a new generation produced every three weeks!

Allergic individuals are sensitive to the mite's fecal pellet, that gets into the air before settling in mattresses, carpeting, upholstery, and bedding. Simple avoidance measures include frequently vacuuming of the carpet and encasing the mattress and pillows in dust-proof plastic or fabric covers. Air conditioning decreases dust mite population by lowering heat and humidity, two conditions required for dust mite growth.

Keeping the house closed up with the air conditioning running not only will lower dust mite growth, but will also reduce the growth of molds and has been shown to reduce pollen intake into the home by 90 percent. Remember to clean air conditioner filters at least every six weeks. Dogs and cats are walking dust-mops, spreading dust mites and molds inside the homes.

Furthermore, allergic children are very sensitive to their allergy-containing dander. The only true hypo-allergenic pet, according to allergist Sher, is "one made of porcelain or ceramic." Exposure to air borne allergens can be reduced by having your child stay indoors whenever possible, especially in the late afternoon when pollen falls or on days when the pollen count is particularly high. Keep car windows up and air conditioning on when riding in the car. Allergic children are extremely sensitive to secondhand tobacco smoke and other pollutants.

Since allergens cannot be completely avoided, allergic children frequently get relief at the pharmacy. The most commonly used medicine is an antihistamine that works by blocking the effects of the chemicals set loose during the allergic reaction. Newer non-sedating antihistamines are now available for children and many times can actually prevent allergy attacks.

Intranasal sprays such as sodium cromolyn or steroids work by stopping the allergic chain reaction before it gets started. Allergy shots (immunotherapy) have been available since 1911, and when indicated, are highly effective in reducing nasal allergies and the need for other medications. Our understanding of allergic disease expands every day.

However, while a "cure" for allergic disease is not imminent, new types of medications are being developed on an ongoing basis. Furthermore, it is important the allergic children not consider themselves "sickly" individuals. They should be allowed to participate in all the things children love to do.

Many offending allergens can be avoided, and with proper care, a child with allergies can be made to feel as comfortable as possible and lead normal, active lives. As a reminder, this column is being written to draw attention to the issues discussed, and should not be relied upon as medical advice and is not intended to replace the advice of your child's physician.