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Allergy & Immunology
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IN TREATING ALLERGIES, ASTHMA, KNOWLEDGE IS POWER

Advertisements you see for the dozens of allergy and asthma medications available today promise you miraculous relief from the sneezing, congestion and asthma problems that go hand in hand with living in New England.

But whether in prescription or over-the-counter form, each medication has its own type and level of effectiveness – and side effects. Beyond that, each patient is unique in the way that he or she responds to a given medicine.

“Knowledge is power,” says John Renneburg, Jr., MD, Dedham Medical’s allergy specialist. “By identifying the factors that trigger each individual’s allergy and asthma reactions, we can clear away the confusion and develop effective, targeted strategies for dealing with them.”

Allergies reflect your body’s mechanism for protecting itself from foreign, invading substances. Normally, this is a good thing when your immune system is warding off harmful viruses. But in the case of allergies, the immune system is inappropriately reacting to benign substances like pollen and mold, and launching its defenses.

“When your immune system first senses a substance it identifies as foreign,” Dr. Renneburg notes, “it may develop a permanent antibody called immunoglobulin E, or IgE, to fight it. Each time you’re exposed to the allergen after that, IgE initiates the release of histamines and other inflammatory chemicals that cause mucous membranes in the sinuses, nose and eyes to swell. The result is runny nose, congestion, perhaps watery eyes – an allergy attack.”

Allergies come in many forms with many different levels of severity. Allergic rhinitis – the runny nose and other symptoms of “hay fever” – is a reaction to pollens

DMA’s Allergy Specialist

DMA Allergy and Immunology specialist John Renneburg, Jr., MD, works closely with allergy and asthma patients of all ages and their primary care physicians to provide aggressive, preventive care with medications and other therapies.

He comes to Dedham Medical from Fallon Clinic in Worcester, where he served as Chief of Allergy. A graduate of Princeton University and Louisiana State University’s School of Medicine, he completed his residency at Tufts-New England Medical Center and his Allergy and Immunology fellowship at the University of Southern California Medical Center. Dr. Renneburg was board-certified in Allergy and Immunology in 1991 and recertified in 2001.

If you would like to seek effective specialty care in managing your asthma or other allergy problems, call 781-329-1400 and ask for the Allergy Department. For information about DMA staff and services, see our web site at www.dedhammedical.com.

from grasses, trees and other plants, or to molds, dust mites and animal dander. Serious cases may involve watery eyes or painful facial pressure, or both.

Some allergies are to the venom found in wasp, hornet and bee stingers. Some are to certain foods, like peanuts and wheat, or to certain medications or other substances. In these cases, the consequences may range from minor (redness and swelling) to extremely serious (life threatening swelling of airway passages).

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Asthma has many triggers, including sinus infections, esophageal reflux, exercise and exposure to irritating substances like smoke and perfume, and even cold air. But allergies to pollens, molds, animal dander and other airborne substances are significant underlying causes of the disorder for many asthma sufferers.

Asthma is a problem of the airways – specifically the bronchial tubes that provide air to the lungs. Exposure to allergens or irritants can cause them to become inflamed and swollen, filled with mucous, and narrowed as surrounding muscles tighten. Consequences include difficulty breathing, wheezing and shortness of breath.

Having allergies doesn't automatically mean you'll have asthma. But for many asthma sufferers, the mechanism is the same – the immune system is generating inflammatory substances in response to contact with allergens. Generally, allergy problems tend to be hereditary, although their onset reflects your own exposure to the allergens in question.

Identifying allergy issues may be as direct as Dr. Renneburg's reviewing your family and personal medical histories and conducting a thorough physical examination. It's possible that these alone will provide enough information to determine a course of action.

If not, it may be desirable to perform skin tests to define specific allergy reactions. To test for pollen, food, and similar allergy issues, samples of possible allergens are placed in tiny scratches on the surface of your skin to see which ones might cause reactions.

Tests for allergies to bee sting venom are more likely to involve an injection into the skin. Testing for allergies to substances like latex may require a specialized blood test.

Once your allergens are identified, a plan of action can be developed, most likely starting with the least medically intrusive – lifestyle changes.

“Acting to avoid allergen triggers can help a great deal,” Dr. Renneburg says. “This may mean keeping your windows closed in the early hours, when pollen counts are highest, or running air conditioning or a dehumidifier to control the air you breathe, or encasing bedding with airtight covers to block dust mites. It should be possible for asthmatics to exercise if they take appropriate precautions.”

If these prove ineffective (or avoiding family pets seems unpalatable), medications would likely be the next step considered.

Major options include:

■ **Corticosteroid sprays,** which deal with inflammation within the nasal passages or lungs. Usually available on a prescription basis, they are generally very effective for allergic rhinitis or asthma, are considered safe for long-term use and don't appear to have serious side effects other than sometimes irritating tissues in the nose.

■ **Antihistamines,** produced as both pills and nasal sprays, work to block the release of the inflammatory histamines that cause runny noses but are less effective in reducing congestion. Decongestants work to offset the overproduction of mucous by the membranes lining the nasal and sinus passages. Essentially, they do this by narrowing the tiny blood vessels that feed the membranes.

Both types of medication are available in prescription and over-the-counter form. Some antihistamines may tend to cause drowsiness, but versions are available that work around this. And because they constrict the blood vessels, some of these medications are considered unsuitable for persons with high blood pressure and men with enlarged prostates.

■ **Preventive and rescue inhalers** can be a huge help in keeping asthmatic airways open.

Another option for treating chronic allergies is allergen immunotherapy, or “allergy shots,” designed to build up your tolerance to the substances to which you are allergic. By starting with a tiny amount of your allergen and gradually increasing the dosages in a series of injections over several years, your body can build up a tolerance to the problematic agents.

“I'm an allergist who has allergies himself, so I understand.” Dr. Renneburg notes. “There is a lot we can do for people who suffer from these chronic problems to improve their quality of life.”

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