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Spring Is Hard to Enjoy With Asthma and Allergies

While nearly everyone enjoys the bright sun and beautiful blossoms of spring, for some people, springtime is a mixed blessing. Anyone suffering from asthma and allergies to pollen has experienced the down side of this otherwise welcome time of year.

If it is true that misery loves company, asthma and allergy sufferers might take comfort in the knowledge that over 50 million people in the U.S. are affected by allergies (more than 20% of the population), and an estimated 20 million people have asthma. (Statistics reported by the American Academy of Allergy, Asthma, and Immunology.) Allergic diseases are the fifth leading cause of chronic disease in this country. Asthma sent approximately 2 million people to the emergency room for treatment in 2001, and is responsible for about 5,000 deaths each year.

Although not all allergic people have asthma, there is a link between the two diseases. Over 70% of people with asthma also have allergies. Both are immune reactions caused by the interaction of genetic and environmental factors. Allergies are exaggerated reactions of the immune system to substances that normally cause no symptoms in most people. Reactions may involve the skin, the eyes, the digestive tract, or the respiratory system. Asthma is a chronic, inflammatory disease of the lungs that causes difficulty breathing. Symptoms include wheezing, coughing, shortness of breath, and tightness in the chest.

No matter what causes an allergic reaction, the process that occurs in the body is generally the same. A person is exposed to a substance to which he or she is especially sensitive. The very first time this occurs, the body produces antibodies to fight against the effects of the allergen. (Common allergens include pollens, molds, certain foods, dust, animal danders, cosmetics, insect venoms, and drugs.) The next time the body is exposed to this substance, the antibodies react by causing the release of histamine. This chemical causes blood vessels to enlarge and slows the rate of blood flow through them, resulting in the leakage of fluid through cell walls. The fluid causes swelling of surrounding tissues; this inflamed tissue creates symptoms such as watery eyes and stuffy nose. Histamine also causes the smooth muscles of the internal organs to contract, which may then cause stomach cramps or an asthma attack to occur.

Asthma attacks are brought on by a variety of triggers – these can include allergens, infection, chemicals, cold air, exercise, stress, and other factors. When a person is exposed to a trigger, the airways leading to the lungs become more inflamed or swollen than usual, and the walls of these passages become smaller as the smooth muscles become tighter. The third stage of an asthma attack (after swelling and tightening) is clogging. The airways increase production of mucus which clogs the already constricted breathing passages so air cannot get through.

The good news about allergies and asthma is that both conditions can be treated successfully. The first method of treatment for both conditions is avoidance. This means staying away from the substance that causes the allergic reaction, if possible. Otherwise, allergy treatments may involve both over-the-counter and prescription medications such as antihistamines, decongestants, and immunotherapy, which is a series of shots that contain the allergen causing the body to build up a protective antibody that reduces the symptoms as the body becomes desensitized to the allergen. In a smaller number of cases of allergies, surgery may be advised, and some people are turning to acupuncture for relief of their allergy symptoms.

With regard to asthma treatment, the same antihistamines and decongestants prescribed for allergies are often ordered. Additionally, many asthmatics use inhalers to help them breathe. Inhaled medications are often anti-inflammatory agents, and may be corticosteroids or non-steroidal medications. They reduce both the swelling and mucus production associated with asthma attacks. In addition to being inhaled, corticosteroids also may be administered in pill form. Anti-inflammatory medications are long-term therapy for asthma. In addition, bronchodilators are available as an inhaler or a pill that may also be prescribed to relieve coughing, wheezing, shortness of breath, and difficulty breathing. (Some are available in liquid form and can also be injected.) They work by opening up the bronchial tubes, or air passages, to allow more air to flow through, and are used as quick relief for acute symptoms (rescue inhalers).

While there is no cure for asthma or many allergies, needless suffering from acute forms of these conditions can be avoided by getting the appropriate medical attention and using treatment remedies properly and consistently. Symptoms can and should be controlled so they are minimal or even absent. And anyone who experiences a severe bout with allergies or asthma should contact a physician immediately for treatment.

For further information about allergies or asthma, visit the American Academy of Allergy Asthma & Immunology at www.aaaai.org. Additional information about this or other public health concerns is available at the Central Connecticut Health District at www.ccthd.org, or by calling 721-2822.

