

ALLERGY UPDATE

ALLERGY & ASTHMA ASSOCIATES

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PITFALLS OF SELF-DIAGNOSIS AND TREATMENT

Allergists are physicians who attend medical school for four years, then go through a residency in internal medicine or pediatrics for three years, before undergoing advanced fellowship training in allergy and immunology for two or three years. After having passed an extensive exam, all of the allergists on our staff have been certified by the American Board of Allergy and Immunology.

Because of their comprehensive training and experience, Board-certified allergists are uniquely qualified to accurately diagnose allergic and related conditions. Attempts at self-diagnosis can lead to ineffective and even dangerous therapies.

One of the problems with people diagnosing themselves is that patients can treat themselves for the wrong problems. For example, some people with runny and congested noses may self-diagnose allergic rhinitis (hayfever) and medicate themselves with over-the-counter antihistamine pills. However, what they really could have is non-allergic (vasomotor) rhinitis which responds best to certain nose sprays rather than to oral antihistamines. An allergist is able to distinguish between the two conditions.

As another example of dangerous self-diagnosis, a person with sinus headache pain may request antibiotics for "sinusitis," yet this person really may have a form of migraine headache for which antibiotics are not effective.

Another pitfall with self-diagnosis is that the root cause of an illness is not explored and identified to prevent future episodes. While many patients with hives or eczema use over-the-counter antihistamines and steroid creams for flare-ups of these skin conditions, an allergy evaluation would determine if the patient is allergic to any foods, such

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COMMON SIGNS OF ALLERGY

- 1) Sneezing
- 2) Nasal congestion
- 3) Recurrent infections or chronic "cold" symptoms
- 4) Sinus pressure
- 5) Postnasal drip
- 6) Itchy, red eyes
- 7) Coughing
- 8) Wheezing
- 9) Hives
- 10) Eczema
- 11) Headaches or dizziness
- 12) Loss of smell, taste or hearing
- 13) Fatigue
- 14) Snoring
- 15) Bloating, gas pains
- 16) Muscle or joint aches



The physicians of Allergy & Asthma Associates are all Board-Certified. (from left): David Chudwin, M.D., Irma Oliff, M.D., J.K. Lawson M.D., Kathy Sonenthal, M.D. and Salmon Goldberg, M.D.

IDENTIFYING ALLERGIES: SKIN VS. BLOOD TESTS

In people with allergy symptoms, skin and blood tests are two effective ways of determining allergic sensitivities. It is important to identify these environmental, food, venom and other allergens in order to avoid them and treat them with medications and, in some cases, allergy shots.

Both skin and blood tests determine whether someone has specific allergic antibodies (immunoglobulin E, called IgE) to a particular substance.

These IgE allergic antibodies are the primary cause of allergic reactions. For example, people with fall hayfever have IgE antibodies to ragweed pollen in their noses and, to a lesser extent, in their blood. When they breathe in ragweed pollen, it is recognized by these IgE antibodies attached to the cells of the nasal lining. An allergic reaction then occurs, leading to typical symptoms such as sneezing, runny nose, congestion, itching and post nasal drip.

With skin testing, the skin is used as a "mirror" for the cells in the nose or lungs. In the scratch test procedure, a small drop of diluted allergen is scratched onto the top layer of the skin with a plastic prong. If the patient has IgE to the particular allergen, a red, itchy raised welt develops after 15 to 20 minutes.

Intradermal tests involve injecting a drop of the allergen into the skin; because the solution is injected, this test is more sensitive than scratch skin testing.

The advantages of skin testing are that it is more sensitive and less expensive than doing blood tests. The disadvantages are that patients have to stop taking all antihistamine medications for two to five days prior to testing. Also, rarely skin testing may cause severe allergic reactions in people who are highly sensitive. In addition, skin testing is difficult in patients with chronic skin conditions where not enough clear skin is available for the test.

The blood test, called a RAST test, measures IgE to specific allergens in the blood. The problem with RAST testing is that most of our bodies' IgE is firmly attached to cells in the nose, lungs, and other tissues. Very little of it is in the blood, making it technically difficult to measure such a small amount. Because of this, RAST tests are less sensitive. This is why we can see positive skin test results in patients with previously negative RAST tests.

Advantages to RAST tests include the ability to measure sensitivity in patients who would be at risk of anaphylaxis from skin tests, in those who are unable to stop medications for the skin testing, and for those who have bad eczema or other skin disorders where clear skin is not available.

While any physician can order RAST tests, allergists are best trained to perform skin testing as well as to interpret skin or RAST test results.

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PITFALLS *(continued from pg.1)*

as milk or nuts, which could cause or worsen the itching and skin rashes. Similarly, allergy testing can help asthmatics discover trigger factors, such as dust mites, cockroaches, molds or pet danders, any of which can lead to asthma exacerbations. Avoiding these triggers can result in better asthma control.

With regard to self-treatment, use of unprescribed over-the-counter (OTC) medications can lead to side effects and drug interactions. In some people, over-the-counter decongestants such as Sudafed (pseudoephedrine) and PE (phenylephrine) can significantly increase blood pressure and heart rate and are not recommended for anyone with high blood pressure, thyroid disease, or heart problems such as mitral valve prolapse.

Some OTC antihistamines including Benadryl (diphenhydramine) and Zyrtec (cetirizine) can cause drowsiness in some people, increased eye pressure in some patients with glaucoma, or difficulty urinating in men with prostate enlargement.

Because of their thorough training in this specialty, allergists are well-qualified to choose the best and safest treatments.

To obtain the only current effective treatment to "cure" allergies — allergy shots, one must consult an allergist. Regular injections of increasing doses of allergens help build up tolerance to the point that a patient becomes much less sensitive to these allergens.

So, if allergy symptoms are nagging you, a consultation with one of our Board-certified allergists is the most direct way to find long-lasting relief.

ASTHMA TRIGGERS

Asthma is a chronic respiratory condition with symptoms that include coughing, wheezing and chest tightness. Breathing in microscopic allergen particles results in persistent inflammation in the lungs, causing them to be "twitchy" or irritable. In most patients, especially children and young adults, asthma has an allergic basis.

Certain triggers may lead to asthma symptoms by aggravating the lungs. Not everyone with asthma has the same triggers. Therefore, it is important for people to identify their specific triggers so these can be either avoided, or they can be treated with medications or allergy shots.

Common asthma triggers include:

- Dust mites are the major allergen in house dust. These microscopic insects, which live by eating human skin scales, are found in pillows, mattresses and rugs. People breathe in dust mite particles from the air and from bedding; these particles can cause asthma to flare up in mite-allergic individuals. Protective casings on pillows and mattresses decrease dust mite exposure, as do room air cleaners. Allergy shots also are effective in reducing allergic sensitivity to mites.
- Animal danders. For some asthmatics, skin scales and saliva from furry pets, especially cats, are potent allergens. Prolonged inhalation of cat or dog dander can inflame the lungs and worsen asthma. While it is best to remove the offending animals from the house, allergy shots to desensitize the person to the cat or dog dander are an effective alternative when the pets must stay.
- Molds are fungal spores which linger in the air during humid weather and on damp surfaces. Mold spores are important allergens which can exacerbate asthma, as well as cause other lung diseases. Leaky roofs, flooded basements and bad plumbing also can lead to conditions where mold growth is promoted. Indoor mold must be removed, although allergy shots for mold are possible when environmental exposure is unavoidable.
- Cold air is a common trigger factor for asthmatics, especially when it is associated with exercise. Both cold air and exercise dry out the lungs, adding to the irritation.
- Smoke is a major irritant for patients with asthma. The tiny particles in cigarette smoke act to damage the cells that line lung passageways. In addition, some patients are actually allergic to the tobacco itself. Smoking cessation and avoiding second-hand smoke are mandatory for asthmatics. A variety of odors, such as perfumes, also bother some patients.
- Emotions. Intense laughter, crying and emotional upset can trigger asthma symptoms in some people. While asthma is not caused by emotional factors, although we wrongly believed this for years, these factors can exacerbate underlying asthma.
- Viral respiratory infections are major precipitants of asthma attacks, especially in childhood. "Reactive airway disease" is a term used for young children who develop wheezing and coughing only when they have "colds." Some kids grow out of this, but others develop full-blown asthma with other triggers that also cause symptoms.

Allergists, who are specialists in the diagnosis and treatment of asthma, should be consulted when asthma is not adequately controlled.

CALL NOW FOR MORE INFORMATION OR APPOINTMENT

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