



## WHY ALLERGIES NOW?

A question that I am frequently asked is ‘why do so many children have allergies now?’ I hear numerous comments such as, “in my day (50 years ago) we never saw this. We all brought peanut butter and jelly sandwiches to school everyday!” This is a common inquiry among most parents that I have encountered over the years. Statistics show that 50 years ago it was very uncommon to meet someone with allergies (especially the food kind that are so prevalent now). Today some 38 percent of the population of the United States and Canada is affected. What is going on? It is not fully understood why some people will develop an allergy and others will not. D.N.A. can’t explain the rise, why one person would be more likely than another to develop an allergy. There is evidently something else going on that is responsible for this trend.

On closer examination, it seems clear that we do know a few things. With the economic explosion of the 1950’s and 1960’s, the allergic disease is a growing problem only in first-world countries. The United Kingdom has the highest prevalence of asthma in teenage years in the world, followed by New Zealand, the Republic of Ireland and the U.S.A. The lowest prevalence, according to studies, is in Eastern European countries, north Africa and India. Allergies and asthma in particular (which we know now are almost 100% linked together) are widely regarded as an urban occurrence, which are linked to car fumes and industry. It also seems that events that occur indoors, in the home, in particular are largely to blame. It is also a common fact that modern society, with the insurgence of Internet, television and video games spend an estimated 90 percent of every day indoors and only 5 percent outside. This appears to make most of us at considerable risk.

### ENVIRONMENTAL ALLERGIES

So if we can make the link between the rise in time spent at home, we must be able to further this conclusion that allergies are breeding somehow, somewhere in our home environments. The first area would be to look at the modern, airtight home. While most of us seem to be geared toward, cozy, highly furnished rooms, these are actually breeding grounds for allergic disease. Warm, centrally heated rooms, wall-to-wall carpets, thick curtains, upholstered sofas, fluffy cushions and the like are all actually providing living conditions for allergy-forming house dust mites.

Pets are also a fairly more common phenomenon in the home and they are another highly allergy triggering factor. Modern buildings are simply not built with proper ventilation to expel the allergy-forming particles that are shed by furry animals.

Another factor related closely to allergies and asthma is mold. This is also highly prevalent in modern airtight homes. Condensation builds up faster and molds are given the perfect damp environment in which to grow and proliferate.

The modern home is also a synthetic home. This means that while, dust mites, pets and molds are the most recognizable allergy triggers in the home, they are not the only ones. There is much evidence to show that a wide array of synthetic products, used indoors, is also contributing to the rise in allergies. These products include household chemicals, synthetic fabrics, cosmetics, pesticides, tobacco smoke, non-prescription medication and emissions from gas cooking. Some are absorbed through the skin and others enter our lungs when we breathe them in. Here they either remain or are absorbed into the bloodstream. Recent studies have shown that many people *in their own homes* are exposed to man-made substances that would not be tolerated at work or outdoors. This is a statistic of great concern!

The fact that New Zealand and Australia have high percentages of allergy sufferers also suggests that grasses, pollens and insects are still ranking high on the list of common allergies. But these are the ones that have been fairly common for many years and we are here asking the question, why so many *other* allergies and why *now*?

#### THE FOOD ALLERGY RISE

Doctors, themselves, don't even really have a definitive answer to this phenomenon, but there is the theory that the rise and availability in the selection of food choices in developed societies has added to this sudden, sharp rise in food allergies. There is also the whole introduction in food manufacturing of additives, preservatives and chemicals that simply didn't exist and certainly not to this extent, fifty years ago. What is happening is that our 'guts', the lining of our stomachs, are poorly adapted to cope with the variety of exotic foods and the prevalence of fairly new and potentially toxic chemicals that are being added to almost 99% of what is available to us in developed worlds. Our bodies, have in a sense, failed to keep up with this constant rise and continual change in our food offerings and our immune systems are programmed to regard these new ingredients as a foreign alien or enemy. \* Please read my article about 'what is an allergy' for more information on this.

#### THE HYGIENE HYPOTHESIS

There is one last theory that has been used to explain the rise in allergies and that is the 'Hygiene Hypothesis'. According to this theory, we live in a world that is completely obsessed with cleanliness. Whereas in earlier times, our bodies would have been exposed to many microbes on a daily basis, thereby strengthening our immune systems, the absence of these microbes has switched the gears of our immune systems from having a protective response to taking on an allergic response. \*Again, please read my article about 'what is an allergy' for more information on this. So ultimately, the very things that we have thought would enhance our health has actually weakened it, making us less able to ward off allergies. Additional evidence is in the proven fact that younger siblings are less likely to develop allergies than oldest or only children.

So while it seems a contradiction to our environmental allergies being triggered by a cluttered, over decorated and cozy home, the Hygiene Hypothesis suggests that we are *too* clean, our homes are *too* sanitized, our children's bodies are *over* vaccinated and *overly* bombarded with antibiotics before our immune systems have managed to establish a satisfactory response to microbes. And, somehow, our food is also *overly* sterile, lacking the microbes that in times past would have promoted the growth of 'gut flora', the 'friendly bacteria' that stimulated the immune system in a way that lent protection against allergies.

## WHAT TO DO?

It seems that from what we know about allergy triggers and possible causes of allergies and asthma and their increased rise in the past fifty years, there are things we can potentially do to, if not cure them, reduce the severity or to potentially avoid them in our children.

First, we want to limit the amount of antibiotics that we are prescribing our children. I know that my children's Pediatrician is very prudent in over prescribing antibiotics and while it seems frustrating at a time when your child is sick, it is ultimately in their best interest.

Second, keep our homes chemical and synthetic free as possible, keep the clutter to a minimum and keep your homes well ventilated. If you have a very sterile environment try to open windows frequently or if you don't have windows, install an extractor fan.

Third, keep yourselves and children away from cigarettes and second hand smoke.

Fourth, if you do have pets in the home, keep them out of your allergic child's bedroom and keep the pet and their belongings as clean and kept as possible.

Fifth, introduce new foods to your babies very slowly and watch for their reactions. While it is good for children to eat a wide variety of food, stick with the basics in the beginning and try to keep your child's food as natural and chemical free as possible. This means, cooking from scratch more, avoiding microwaves and highly, pre-packaged foods.

Sixth, get your children out of the house!!! Let them roll and play in the dirt and mud and always use common sense and moderation in all aspects of your child's life. This is how it was always done and seems to be something that modern society needs a little bit more of.

Jennifer Montoni