

Common Myths About Allergy and Asthma

Allergies and asthma are very common in Australia and New Zealand. Around one in five people will develop allergies at some time during their life, and about one in ten will develop asthma. Far from being a trivial inconvenience, allergies have a significant impact on quality of life and are associated with other medical conditions. Severe allergic reactions (anaphylaxis) are potentially life threatening. Unfortunately, many people confuse myth with reality in the way they view and treat allergies and asthma.

Myth 1: Allergies are uncommon

Reality: The rapid and continuing rise of allergic diseases over the past few decades is a serious public health issue in Australia and New Zealand. Current statistics indicate that:

- One in five people will develop allergies at some time during life.
- One in ten infants will have a food allergy.
- One in ten children will develop eczema.
- Hospital admissions for anaphylaxis have increased five-fold in the past 20 years.

Myth 2: Allergies are harmless

Reality: Allergies are a serious problem in Australia and New Zealand and should not be ignored. Untreated allergies have a significant impact on quality of life.

Allergic rhinitis (hay fever) results in poor sleep quality, fatigue and daytime sleepiness. Adults find it harder to think and function at work, suffer from greater absenteeism and more work-related injury. They are more irritable and moody than healthier people, and find it harder to make important decisions. School-aged children with allergic rhinitis can do poorly in examinations and often cannot recall information taught during class. Untreated allergies can also worsen other chronic respiratory problems such as asthma, sinusitis and skin disorders such as eczema and urticaria (hives).

Some allergies to foods, drugs and insect stings can lead to a potentially life threatening reaction called anaphylaxis - a systemic allergic reaction which can be fatal.

Myth 3: Smoking does not trigger asthma

Reality: Babies who are born to smoking mothers have a greater chance of developing asthma, than children of non-smoking mothers. Smoking is also a known trigger of asthma attacks and should not be ignored. If you must smoke, do it outside and away from your children.

Myth 4: Flowering plants cause hay fever

Reality: Seasonal allergic rhinitis, commonly known as hay fever, is caused by allergy to pollen, rather than hay. Pollen allergy tends to be due to air borne pollen from wind pollinated grass, weed and tree species. By contrast, the pollen of flowering plants is large and sticky, does not blow very far, and requires birds and bees for pollination. Therefore, when people complain that scented flowers trouble them, it is usually due to chemical irritation from the perfume that makes them sneeze, rather than the pollen.

Myth 5: Moving to another region can cure allergies

Reality: Allergic rhinitis (hay fever) may be triggered by wind-blown pollen, mostly in spring and summer, or by other allergens such as house dust mite, animals and mould spores all year round. Moving away from the source of allergen (such as interstate, or from inland areas to the coast), may only temporarily relieve allergies.

Allergic people are also prone to developing new allergies, and often symptoms reappear within a few years with exposure to new plants, or other sources of allergen such as moulds or house dust mite.

Myth 6: Continuous exposure to animals will desensitise you to them

Reality: If you are allergic to an animal, continuous exposure will not decrease your allergy. In fact, one in three people who are already allergic and exposed to indoor pets will become allergic to them as well over time.

The proteins found in a pet's dander (skin flakes, hair, fur, wool, feathers, saliva and urine) can cause an allergic reaction or aggravate asthma in some people. Pet hair, fur or wool can also collect pollen and other outdoor allergens.

Keeping indoor pets is also associated with asthma and the need for more medication. If you are allergic to animals, sensitivity often worsens with ongoing exposure. To relieve symptoms:

- Minimise exposure to household pets by removing them from inside the home.
- Keep pets out of the bedroom.
- Have hard flooring.
- Wash the animal regularly to reduce the amount of allergen they shed.

Myth 7: You cannot develop an animal allergy if you do not have pets

Reality: Animal allergens, particularly cat and horse allergen can be carried on clothes. This may sensitise other people who do not have pets themselves and provoke symptoms in sensitive individuals.

Myth 8: Some animals are better for people with asthma and allergies

Reality: The allergens in cats are mainly from their sebaceous glands in their skin and the main source of allergens in dogs is from their saliva. Even if some breeds do not shed dander, the allergen can still become attached to dust particles in the house (such as walls, carpets, bedding, clothing and drapes), and does not easily break down with time. Allergen can be continuously suspended in the air, even if the animal has been removed from the house or is not in the bedroom.

While the amount of allergen shed by an individual animal may vary with a number of factors (sex, whether de-sexed or not, short or long hair, fur or wool), the allergen is the same amongst species.

Allergies to other animals such as guinea pigs, horses and mice have also been reported. Even iguanas can trigger allergies. There are no hypoallergenic animals.

Myth 9: Eliminating wheat and milk helps asthma and hay fever

Reality: Diet plays a minor role in the management of asthma or allergic rhinitis (hay fever). Eliminating wheat and milk will help your allergy only if you are confirmed to be allergic to wheat and milk.

While some children with food allergies go on to develop eczema, asthma or allergic rhinitis, taking all people off wheat or dairy products as a routine can adversely affect nutrition (particularly in children), and directs effort into unnecessary areas.

Food allergic reactions are usually rapid onset, severe and obvious. Symptoms usually include rashes, throat swelling, vomiting and sometimes atopic eczema. Nuts, fish, shellfish, milk and eggs are the most common food allergies in children. Bakers can develop asthma from inhaled wheat flour.

Scientific studies show no evidence that milk either increases mucus production or worsens asthma. More commonly, patients will react to cold drinks (such as milk), with wheezing because of the inhalation of cool dry air while it is being drunk.

Myth 10: Colours and preservatives are a common cause of asthma

Reality: Preservatives like sodium metabisulfite (220, 221, and 222) in wine, dried fruits, vinegar, grapes and some fruit salads can worsen asthma, but do not cause it. Inhalation of small amounts of sulfur dioxide may cause a reflex contraction of the bronchial tubes.

Monosodium Glutamate (MSG or 621), has a bad reputation for triggering asthma in some people, but scientific studies have shown this to be a relatively rare problem. Benzoates (used in cordials), can sometimes cause reactions. Allergy testing is unreliable for confirming sensitivity to these substances.

Myth 11: Alternative tests and treatments are as effective as conventional tests and medicines

Reality: There are several unorthodox tests for allergy such as cytotoxic food testing, vega testing, kinesiology, iridology, pulse testing, alcat testing and Rinkel's Intradermal skin testing. These have no scientific basis, are unreliable, and have no role in the assessment of allergy.

On the other hand, skin tests and blood allergen specific IgE tests are reliable and scientifically validated allergy tests. Together with a medical history and examination, these tests can help your doctor define the cause of your allergies and are rebated by Medicare in Australia.

Many Australians use dietary supplements, complementary and alternative medicines to treat or prevent various ailments. Sometimes they use them in conjunction with medications prescribed by their doctor. Regardless of your decision in this regard, it is important to let your doctor know you are taking them. This is because side effects and interactions with medications may occur. It is important to realise that alternative medicines have not been subjected to the rigorous study of effectiveness and side effects that conventional medicines undergo.

Myth 12: Allergies and asthma can be cured

Reality: Even though effective treatments are available, there are currently no cures for asthma or allergies. With appropriate diagnosis and management, most asthma and allergy sufferers will lead normal, active lives with little disturbance to their quality of life.

The closest thing to a cure for allergy is allergen immunotherapy (desensitisation), which is effective for treating some allergies like allergic rhinitis (hay fever), asthma and stinging insect allergy. This is currently not available for treating food allergies in Australia and New Zealand, except in research trials.

Myth 13: Asthma and hay fever sprays are dangerous

Reality: Inhaled medications, including corticosteroids (preventer treatment), are commonly used to treat asthma. They are very safe and effective, as long as they are used at an appropriate dose under medical supervision.

Similar medications (intranasal corticosteroid sprays), are often used to treat moderate to severe allergic rhinitis (hay fever). There is no evidence that long term use of these medications (in appropriate dosage and under medical supervision), is harmful, although medical advice should be sought if side effects occur.

Myth 14: Many children grow out of their asthma and allergies

Reality: Allergies can last for many years. For example, it is known that:

- 85% of children with atopic dermatitis (eczema), improve by their teenage years, but often have dry and irritable skin and problems with soap and some cosmetics for life.
- 80% of children diagnosed with allergic rhinitis (hay fever), will still have trouble ten years later.
- 40% of young adults diagnosed with allergic rhinitis (hay fever) will still have symptoms 20 years later.

Asthma can also persist. Some children have asthma symptoms that improve or disappear during adolescence, whereas others will worsen. Those with severe or persistent asthma tend to remain much the same as adults. Even when symptoms disappear completely, they may return later on in life, particularly with infections or exercise.

Allergic reactions to cow's milk, soy or egg in infants often resolve by the time a child enters kindergarten, but others (such as peanut, tree nut or seafood), can persist for life.

Myth 15: Allergy drugs are dangerous and make you sleepy

Reality: Non-drowsy antihistamines are readily available from pharmacies. These medicines have been proven to be safe when driving, and because they last a lot longer in the body, they are also more convenient to take (typically once daily).

Older sedating antihistamines have been available for decades. The only advantage is that they are inexpensive. They often cause drowsiness and interfere with people's ability to drive or operate machinery safely. Their impact is even more dangerous when alcohol is consumed. Adults using sedating antihistamines often find it difficult to think clearly, elderly patients may get confused, and children often become sleepy or irritable in class. It is therefore important to check medication labels, and to consult a pharmacist or doctor before you consider using these medicines.

Myth 16: There is no way of getting rid of house dust mites

Reality: The greatest concentration of house dust mites and their allergenic faecal particles is in carpeted bedrooms and bedding, and in houses where there are domestic animals, especially cats.

Polished boards or other hard floor coverings, regular washing of bed linen and encasing mattresses and pillows in barrier encasing will substantially reduce exposure to dust mite allergen.

Although it will not eradicate the dust mite, vacuuming once per week will reduce the number of dust mites, particularly if HEPA filters are used.

Myth 17: A little bit of peanut does no harm

Reality: Contact with a trace amount of peanut can be fatal for an extremely sensitive peanut allergic individual.

Myth 18: Damp houses are just as healthy as dry houses

Reality: Damp houses have higher mould content than dry homes, and indoor mould is a common cause of perennial allergic rhinitis, sinusitis, bronchitis and asthma.

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