

## **Back to school with allergies and asthma**

For kids returning to school after a relaxing, carefree summer break, it can certainly be difficult to “shift gears” and focus their attention on academics. But for children with allergies or asthma, the transition back to the classroom is even more challenging. After all, it’s not so easy to concentrate on the subject matter at hand and perform to the best of your abilities when you’re constantly distracted by itchy, watery eyes, a runny nose, or wheezing.

Dr. Sudhir Rao of Asthma & Allergy Center notes that the back-to-school season coincides with an increase in airborne weed pollens (e.g., ragweed) and mold, which are common allergy triggers. Kids are also transitioning from the relatively controlled environment of home to a setting where they may be exposed to a different set of allergens, such as dander from the class pet.

“If your child is experiencing symptoms that could be related to allergies, such as itchy eyes and nose or something more serious like asthma, you need to see a doctor to determine if the symptoms are being triggered by something that can be avoided.

Trigger avoidance is the first line of defense and is often useful in making a child’s quality of life much better when he or she goes back to school,” states Dr. Rao.

Another very important issue that has been coming to the attention of allergists in the past 10 to 15 years is food allergies. Parents of kids with known allergies to foods such as peanuts, eggs, or wheat usually do a pretty good job of keeping an eye on what they eat and are exposed to in the home. However, when they go to school, where lunchroom food sharing is commonplace, they may be at greater risk of exposure to their trigger food.

“Communication is the key to counteracting this risk,” Dr. Rao says. “Kids with food allergies are usually fairly knowledgeable about what they need to avoid, but their classmates and teachers will have no idea. If your child is allergic to a particular food, it’s vital to notify the school about the allergy and meet with the child’s primary teachers and principal to see what policies are in place. Then, parents need to work with school personnel and an allergist to determine the best way to reduce the risk of exposure at school.”

Children who are allergic to insect stings should be alerted to the fact that bees and other stinging insects are at their most active in late summer and early autumn—just as school is coming back into session. Parents must also discuss the situation with school personnel so they are apprised of how to respond appropriately in the event that the child is stung. Furthermore, children who are prone to life-threatening anaphylaxis in response to insect stings or exposure to certain foods must carry with them a current epinephrine self-injector at all times and are advised to wear a medical-alert tag announcing their allergy.

Older students with allergies or asthma who are heading off to college need to consider the impact their changing environment could have on their symptoms, as well. “While most college-aged allergy sufferers know their limitations as far as outdoor allergens are concerned, they may not be aware of how living in a dormitory or apartment with a roommate might aggravate their symptoms,” Dr. Rao explains. “For example, if they’re accustomed to living in an air-conditioned environment at home but they have to open windows for ventilation in the dorm, they may experience problems with symptoms due to the increase in airborne allergens entering the room. In addition, sleeping in a different bed can lead to issues for students with dust mite allergies. They might also be exposed to non-allergic irritants that can further aggravate their symptoms, such as cigarette smoke.”

Dr. Rao advises college students with allergies to see their doctor for recommendations on how to avoid their particular triggers in the dormitory setting. He also encourages them to take the same steps in the dorm room that they take at home to mitigate allergen exposure. For instance, if they have a known dust mite allergy, they should cover their bed and pillow with hypoallergenic linens just as they would in their bedroom at home.

When total avoidance of allergy triggers is impractical for students, management of allergy symptoms through medication is usually effective. It's also important to discuss a long-term management strategy with the child's doctor, which may include allergy immunotherapy, or allergy shots.

"If allergies are affecting your child's quality of life and performance at school, it's important to discuss the situation with an allergist as well as school personnel," says Dr. Rao. "Given proper advice for avoidance, appropriate medications for symptom control, and, potentially, allergy immunotherapy, the situation can be improved significantly and your child will be able to function effectively in school."

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