

## **Seeking allergy relief? See an allergist!**

People who suffer with persistent allergies or asthma commonly grow accustomed to living with these aggravating conditions, whether on a seasonal or year-round basis. Many learn to accept the unpleasant symptoms and diminished quality of life they cause as normal or unavoidable. In time, allergy sufferers can actually lose sight of what it's like to feel healthy. Resigning oneself to the misery of allergies is regrettable, however, when finding relief could be a simple matter of seeing an allergist.

### ***What sets an allergist apart?***

Having completed four years of medical school, a three-year residency in internal or pediatric medicine, and two years of fellowship training in allergy/asthma and immunology, an allergist is uniquely poised to treat two serious health problems that afflict and disrupt the lives of more than 50 million Americans—allergies and asthma.

"As allergists, we're a lot like detectives," states John Winder, MD, CPI, of Dr. Winder & Associates. "A very important aspect of allergy management is closely examining the patient's history to determine whether the problem he or she is having is actually related to allergy, what is triggering the allergy, and what can be done about it. We're taught to root out these things because, oftentimes, there's more going on than can be revealed through a simple skin test."

### ***What causes allergies?***

Allergies occur when the body's immune system overreacts to harmless proteins, called "antigens," as if they are harmful invaders, such as viruses or bacteria. These proteins—for example, pollen, mold spores, pet dander, dust mite particles, certain foods, certain plant oils, and latex dust—can enter the body in a variety of ways, including inhalation, ingestion, or absorption through the skin. Symptoms of allergy most commonly arise in areas where immune system cells are massed to fend off invading microbes, such as the skin, nose, eyes, throat, sinuses, lungs, and stomach lining.

Heredity plays a role in allergy susceptibility, as well. According to Dr. Winder, if there is a history of allergies on each side of your family, the likelihood that you'll develop allergies is two out of three to three out of four. Your odds are 50/50 if only one side of the family is involved.

What's interesting is that people don't inherit sensitivity to particular allergens, such as pet dander or dust mites. Instead, they inherit the gene that gives them the tendency to have allergies and then develop sensitivity to specific allergens based on exposure.

### ***"But it's just an allergy!"***

Allergists continually emphasize the importance of seeking expert treatment for allergies or asthma, both for adults and children. "Too often, people say, 'It's just an allergy' or 'Don't worry, he'll outgrow it.' But data shows that the impact allergies and asthma have in terms of quality of life, time lost at work or school, and dollars spent can be very significant," Dr. Winder observes.

What's more, postponing expert intervention for allergies or asthma can have long-term health consequences. For example, children who have a chronic nasal obstruction due to allergies often become mouth-breathers, which can lead to the development of an overbite.

With asthma, the long-term consequences of postponed or inadequate treatment can be even more concerning. "We used to think of asthma as just episodes of bronchospasm, but we've since come to understand that asthma involves chronic inflammation, which, if left unchecked, causes changes in the lung tissue, called 'remodeling,' that can eventually interfere with the lungs' ability to inflate and deflate properly. Asthma really is a reversible airway disease, but the sooner we intervene, the better," says Dr. Winder. To appreciate the impact asthma has in the US, consider the following:

\*More than 23.4 million Americans have asthma; 7 million are under age 18.

\*Asthma causes more than 3,600 deaths annually.

\*Asthma results in 497,000 hospitalizations and 1.8 million emergency room visits annually.

\*Asthma is the most common chronic illness in childhood, accounting for 12.8 million missed school days for children and 10.1 million lost work days for adults each year.

\*The estimated economic cost of asthma is \$19.7 billion annually.

The good news is, in spite of these sobering statistics, Dr. Winder is observing a significant decrease in the number of patients who have to be hospitalized for asthma-related problems compared to years past. He attributes this encouraging trend to recent advances in preventive asthma therapies, recognizing that asthma is an inflammatory process, and the involvement of asthma specialists such as allergists.

### ***The allergy/asthma connection***

Though we tend to associate the treatment of asthma with pulmonary specialists, this disease is more commonly linked to allergy than many realize. In fact, according to recent findings, 50 percent of adults with asthma and 80 percent of children with asthma have some form of allergen as a trigger. "It's also been shown that we can immunize people very effectively against these allergens, thereby reducing the severity of the asthmatic response," adds Dr. Winder.

However, it's important to note that allergies are just one of the factors that can trigger an asthmatic response. Not all people with asthma have allergies as a trigger, and many people with allergies do not have asthma. Examples of non-allergen asthma triggers include cold weather, physical exertion, respiratory infection, aspirin, environmental irritants, and certain food additives and preservatives.

### ***Don't go it alone!***

Dr. Winder points out that the vast majority of people with allergies self-medicate with over-the-counter remedies, at least initially. When that approach fails, the next step is typically a visit to their primary-care physician. "We usually see them only after the problem has become severe. We want to convey the message that if people would turn to an allergist early on, they could greatly reduce the impact of allergies on their lives and soon be symptom-free," he says.

**Dr. John A. Winder**  
**Toledo Allergy society**

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