

Timely tips on traveling with allergies and asthma

With another summer travel season upon us, many people across the country are getting ready to depart on long-anticipated, well-earned vacations—some to far-flung destinations, others closer to home. In preparation, family vehicles are getting serviced, maps are getting double checked, flights and lodging are being confirmed, and luggage is being packed to overflowing with clothing and other vacation essentials.

For people with allergies and asthma, however, effective travel planning demands a little extra consideration in order to prevent unpleasant—or even life-threatening—physical symptoms from turning that dream vacation into a nightmare.

Know your location, location, location!

The old real-estate adage—that the most important issue is “location, location, location”—applies just as well to people with allergies and asthma. Depending on where you live or where you’re heading, you’ll be exposed to particular allergens at different times of year. That’s why winter-break travelers who leave behind cold, snowy Ohio for warm, sunny Florida sometimes encounter allergy problems that they hadn’t anticipated. Essentially, they’re traveling from a frozen, dormant area with few allergens in the air to a locale where the air may be laden with pollen and molds. The sudden, overwhelming exposure can really leave them sniffing and sneezing.

“We always tell patients that if they’re going on a trip, they should call us well in advance so we can see which allergens they’re likely to encounter at their destination at the time that they’ll be traveling and, depending on the severity of their allergies, we can pre-medicate them for a week or so ahead of time if necessary,” says allergist Dr. Sudhir Rao.

Prepare to leave your allergy comfort zone

People with allergies and asthma typically do a pretty good job of creating a home environment that minimizes their exposure to allergy triggers. For instance, people who are allergic to dust mites will usually cover their mattress and pillow at home with hypoallergenic linens and people who are allergic to pet dander will either exclude pets from the home entirely or restrict them to particular rooms. However, staying in a hotel or motel or in the home of a friend or relative is an entirely different story. You simply can’t count on the same level of control and can easily get into trouble with overwhelming allergy symptoms. Again, knowing where you’re going and what allergens you’re likely to encounter can give your allergist important insights on how to protect you on your trip.

Keep medications handy

Prior to departing on your vacation, make sure you’ve packed all of your allergy medications, including self-injectable epinephrine if necessary, and that they are conveniently accessible. This is especially critical if you’ll be flying to your destination. In this case, make sure all of your medications are packed in your carry-on and taken on board the plane with you, not checked with your other luggage. Be sure to declare your medications to the TSA security officials in the screening process.

Protect yourself from food allergies

Those with food allergies who aren’t traveling by plane can take their own food along with them on vacation so they can be absolutely confident that what they’re eating is safe. If that’s not practical, for instance when it’s necessary to fly to your destination, be sure to check for appropriate food accommodations in advance. Many popular tourist destinations, such as Disney World, cater to families and are well aware of food allergies. If you advise them up front, they should be able to make accommodations for you ahead of time.

“Also, since you don’t know what the airline passenger on the flight ahead of you was eating in your seat, we tell parents of kids with food allergies to wipe off any surfaces, such as the fold-down tray table and armrests, before flying. Keep in mind that some flights are designated nut-

free and that the first flight of the day is usually the safest for allergy sufferers because any allergens have settled down onto surfaces instead of floating in the air,” Dr. Rao explains.

Locate the nearest healthcare facility

Mild, non-life-threatening allergy symptoms, such as itching and sneezing, can often be managed using readily available over-the-counter antihistamines. But if you have asthma or a known food allergy, it’s vital to know the location of the nearest urgent-care facility when traveling and to keep your medications with you at all times. If you’re planning a camping vacation or other wilderness travel, make sure there is a hospital within five to ten miles of your destination.

“If you run into any allergy problems, call your doctor,” advises Dr. Rao. “If your doctor is licensed in that state or region, he or she will be able to call in a prescription for you. Even if the doctor isn’t licensed in that area, most states allow certain common prescriptions, such as nasal spray, to be phoned in as long as there is a record of the patient being on the medication in the past. Of course, if you experience any life-threatening symptoms, you should call 911 immediately.”

Know which bugs will be there

For people with insect allergies, it’s critical to discuss with their allergist which stinging insects are likely to be present at their vacation destination. Don’t assume that just because an insect is dormant or absent at home that it won’t be present and active at your destination. Also, keep in mind that your vacation destination might host stinging insects that you never encounter at home, such as fire ants. Dr. Rao points out that when stung by a fire ant for the first time, the majority of people experience only a local reaction. However, if you’ve traveled to the same region before and been stung, you could be sensitized and at greater risk of a serious allergic reaction the next time.

Know the effects of altitude on asthma

Mountainous regions are very popular tourist destinations, but in spite of all that clean mountain air, people with asthma who head for higher altitudes can actually experience problems with shortness of breath—generally at altitudes higher than 5,000 feet. There are two reasons for this: One is that oxygen levels are lower at higher altitudes. The other is that the air up there is very dry, which can irritate the airways and cause bronchospasm. If you have asthma and plan to travel to a significantly higher altitude, be sure to advise your allergist.

Get well ahead of time

Vacation is supposed to be a time to relax, get closer to your family, and “recharge your batteries.” Why let allergies and asthma stand in the way of a wonderful experience? “If you do have allergies and asthma and you’re not perfectly well, talk to your allergist ahead of time to get insights on how to get better and stay well throughout your vacation. “You may need to increase your medications in anticipation of problems, but it is possible to feel your best so you can enjoy every minute of your vacation,” says Dr. Rao.

Dr. Sudhir Rao
Toledo Allergy Society

Reprinted with permission from the June, 2011 issue of *Healthy Living News*.