

Look Out For The Asthma & Allergy Epidemic !

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Yes, the incidence of allergy and asthma in the United States appears to be increasing. There is a widespread concern among scientists that this trend will continue. Worse than our typical flare ups of allergy and asthma problems each spring in Savannah, it appears our citizens are suffering from more breathing related problems throughout the year.



According to the Centers for Disease Control in Atlanta, the prevalence of asthma in children increased from nearly 4% in 1980 to 6% in 2003. Asthma is now the third leading cause of hospitalization for children and adolescents in America.

What is asthma? The symptoms include wheezing, shortness of breath, severe cough and asthma attacks which can be so severe they require immediate therapy in the emergency room. No single medical test can be used to diagnose asthma with certainty because there are likely several chemical and biological defects in the asthma sufferer which can bring about this syndrome. Doctors diagnose asthma on the basis of the medical history and physical exam along with several tests to assess obstruction in the airways of patients. Indeed, obstruction in the airways of the lungs causes the severe symptoms of asthma and these obstructions are due to inflammation and swelling in the bronchial tubes of the lungs due to a number of medical insults. The doctor must be careful to distinguish the patient suffering from asthma from a number of other diseases which can cause similar signs and symptoms.

Often, allergies cause or provoke attacks of asthma. The prevalence of allergy in our population has also increased over time. Allergies can be diagnosed by simple blood tests for antibodies produced by the immune system which are responsible for patients suffering from allergies. Some patients suffer from severe asthmas and yet do not appear to be allergic individuals.

What is causing this rise in asthma and allergy in our society? Several factors have been proposed to account for this. We know that smoke from cigarettes is closely linked to respiratory illness in children including asthma and wheezing. Worse yet, young adults who smoke increase their chances of developing asthma. Air pollution, particularly automobile fumes, are thought to worsen asthma symptoms. Indoor allergens such as house dust may contribute the development of allergic asthma in children.

Many scientists have commented on the possibility that asthma in young people is being made worse by obesity. Weight gain appears to make asthma symptoms worse and weight loss is associated with improvement. Recent changes in lifestyle and diet may be associated with both asthma and obesity.

A popular hypothesis for the increasing prevalence of asthma and allergy is the so-called “hygiene hypothesis”. Investigators have noted that children exposed to infections from older siblings seem to have some protection from the development of asthma and allergy. Children raised in environments rich in bacteria and microbial organisms such as around stables and barns tend to be much less likely to develop allergies than children in homes with high levels of hygiene. Early exposure to microbes or germs might allow the human immune system to develop some tolerance to allergens or other environmental toxins which are responsible for triggering the symptoms of allergy and asthma.

Asthma can occur in infants, adolescents and for the first time in adults. Many adults with onset of asthma actually suffered from the disease as children only to have it return. The environmental “trigger” for their asthma likely is present not just with the start of their symptoms but it is also present in fetal life. Asthma and allergy is not only caused by environmental factors but also by genetic risk factors. Asthma in adults can sometimes be definitively blamed on a particular exposure such as asthma caused by aspirin or by industrial and workplace chemicals.

So, how should we best fight this worsening health crisis? Certainly adults must protect their children from smoke at all times. Patients with signs and symptoms of allergy and asthma should receive early diagnosis and effective therapy to avoid the many serious complications of these diseases. Fortunately, Savannah and the surrounding community are blessed with many primary care and specialty physicians trained to recognize and treat these conditions. If you believe you or a loved one might suffer from allergy and asthma, contact your physician now.

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