



By: Dr. Rima Sanka

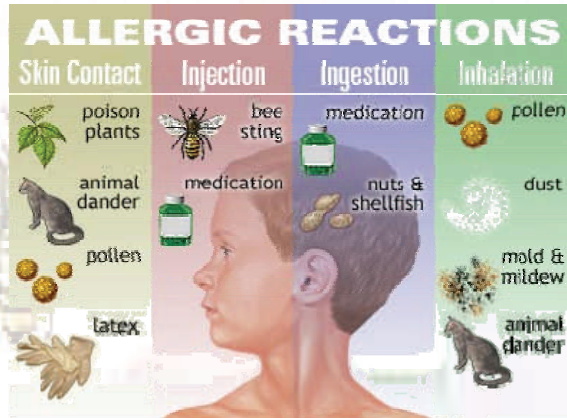
This is a personal account from an unfortunate gentleman posted on www.allergynursing.com, “I moved from Redlands, Ca. to Destin, Florida (panhandle) 5 years ago. I was fine for the first couple of years but in the past three have been simply miserable. It comes and goes all year leading me to believe it’s a mold or spore thing. Claritin D and Rhinocort are only a thin veiled shield against whatever is getting me. I’ll go home to Michigan and in a day or two feel awesome. The burning eyes, stomach pains, complete lethargy, depression, and just plain meanness are gone and return with a vengeance within a day of getting back home to Florida. It’s so bad I am leaving Florida (sold our house and will be moving north in a month or so). I’m a very fit 37 year old male with literally no other health problems”.

Does this sound familiar to you at all? Perhaps you know of someone who has experienced similar, if not such dramatic problems.

My name is Dr. Rima Sanka and I recently completed my fellowship training at USF in Adult and Pediatric Allergy, Asthma, and Immunology. One of the main roles played by allergists is to educate patients on what their true allergies are, how to avoid them, and how to treat and/or cure them so they may live a healthy lifestyle. It is my hope that this column should answer some of the common questions, verify or refute common allergy myths to be true or false, and empower you to make positive decisions with regard to your health and allergies.

Since this is the introductory article, I will start with some basic facts.

- Estimates from a skin test survey suggest that allergies affect as many as 40 to 50 million people in the United States.
- Allergic diseases affect more than 20% of the U.S. population and 40% of children.
- Allergic diseases are the sixth leading cause of chronic disease in the United States.
- It is estimated that in 1998, increased absenteeism and reduced productivity due to allergies cost U.S. companies more



than \$250 million. Allergies are also linked to attention problems and poor school performance in children.

- There are many types of allergies. Allergies to indoor and outdoor allergens (such as pollen, dust or mold), food, medicine, and insects are the main problems. We spend more than 20 hours per day indoors which contributes to perennial (or year-round) allergies.
- Viral upper respiratory infections can aggravate allergies.

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Normally, the human body defends itself against viruses or bacteria, but sometimes the defenses aggressively attack other substances such as dust, mold, or pollen. People are exposed to allergens through inhalation, ingestion, contact with skin, and injection.

The immune system generates antibodies called immunoglobulin E (IgE), a molecule to attack and destroy the allergen. Each IgE antibody specifically targets a particular allergen and can be tested individually.

In this process, inflammatory chemicals like histamines, cytokines, and leukotrienes are released or produced, and unpleasant (or life-threatening, in the case of anaphylaxis) symptoms may be experienced by an allergic person.

The primary method of preventing allergy symptoms is for patients to avoid the allergens that trigger the allergies. This is possible for certain allergens such as a cat or a dog that can be

removed from the home. However, other ubiquitous allergens such as oak, pollen or ragweed are almost impossible to avoid.

Medication can be very helpful and generally,

have low side effects. When medication is not

enough, immunotherapy is the key to long term management and a potential cure for allergies and allergic asthma. Immunotherapy is also known as “allergy vaccines” or “allergy shots”. It is the introduction of small but slowly increasing amounts of allergen into the body, eventually changing the immune system to tolerate a normal level of allergen, rendering their allergies no longer a problem.

Basically, immunotherapy trains the body to not see the allergens as foreign substances that it needs to attack. The hypersensitivity is gone and so are the disabling symptoms. Most people on immunotherapy for 1-3 years are sick less often, have less severe infections, and generally improve their quality of life without the need and expense of daily medication.

Rima Sanka, DO, Board Certified and Fully Licensed, has a private office in Pinellas Park, FL. <http://www.allergydoc.us/>

Feel free to write in with comments or feedback to HealthTalk@citymasala.com.

