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Let us fight the Allergy Epidemic Together!

Allergic diseases result from interaction between genes and environment. You inherit allergic genes from your parents. A child has 25% chance of developing allergies if one parent has allergies or asthma and 50-60% chance if both parents have them. Genes by themselves can not cause allergies or asthma. Exposure to allergy causing substances (allergens) is required before allergies develop.

Allergic diseases are on the rise globally. Exact reasons for this are not clear. According to Hygiene hypothesis reduced exposure to infections such as measles and tuberculosis during growing years due to improved socioeconomic conditions, higher standards of living, ready availability of vaccines and antibiotics and better access to healthcare leads to this allergy epidemic. The immune system has two arms to deal with foreign proteins- TH1 and TH2. TH1 arm mainly fights infections and TH2 arm deals with parasites and other allergy causing proteins. TH2 arm developed millions of years ago when our ancestors were living in jungles where parasites posed a constant threat to survival. A newborn infant's immune system left to itself will develop along TH2 pathway leading to development of allergies. Exposure to infections stimulates the TH1 arm of the immune system and the infant is less likely to develop allergies!

Increased exposure to allergens also predisposes to development of allergies. Living mostly indoors, having inadequate ventilation and having exposure to dust mites, animal dander and cigarette smoke during early life stimulates the TH2 arm of the immune system resulting in allergies. Breast feeding for at least one year, delaying introduction of solid foods in the infant's diet until the infant is 6 months old and avoiding introduction of regular cow's milk and meat before one year, eggs before 18 months and fish, seafood, peanuts and tree nuts before 3 years of age are some of the commonly advised strategies to prevent or postpone the development of allergies in children born in families with high incidence of allergies. The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends that pregnant and breastfeeding women avoid peanut containing foods from their diet.

Usually the child develops allergies to foods first followed by allergies to indoor allergens and outdoor allergens in that order. Many experts recommend routinely screening children at 1 year of age for allergies by doing allergy skin tests or blood tests. This will help identify children at risk of developing allergies and implement prevention strategies in time. Remember it is better to prevent development of allergies or asthma in the first place than to treat them after they fully develop!

About the author:

Natarajan Asokan, M.D., F.A.A.P. is a board certified allergist and immunologist and a board certified pediatrician with over 25 years of experience as a physician and 7 years of experience as a practicing allergist & immunologist. He treats adults and children with various allergy & immunology problems. He can be reached at 1739, Beverly Ave, Suite 118, Kingman, AZ 86409, and Tel: 928-681-5800, Fax: 928-681-5801, or www.trinityallergy.com