

OVER- reacting

The Rise & Rise of Food Allergies

WRITER Louise Renwick

While some of us may be aware that we don't feel so good after eating certain things – and I'm not talking about the guilt of devouring an entire tub of Ben and Jerry's here! Many of us chew our way through life generally unaware of the things that don't agree with us and even if we do, rather flummoxed by exactly why.

Speak to any doctor and they'll tell you that more and more of us are reporting allergies worldwide. "Four percent of children and two percent of adults suffer from some type of food allergy," tells Dr Adrian Morris, an allergy specialist who works at Harley Street's esteemed London Medical Centre and who has a specific interest in food allergies and anaphylaxis.

The Asian experts are the saying the same "we're seeing a significant increase

in the rating of the symptoms of eczema, allergic rhinitis, headaches, migraines and constipation," says HK Biotek Director, Kelvin Tang, who recently gathered information on allergy trends from a group of 147 medical professionals and 1053 patients. The findings revealed an increase over the last two years in the number of people suffering from allergies to gluten and soybeans.

EXPLAINING THE IMMUNE SYSTEM

Allergic reactions start when a substance triggers a response in our immune system. In simple terms, there are two sides maintaining a balance. One side fights bacteria and the other side fights parasites. As Dr Morris explains, "When our immune system is no longer exposed to bugs and germs it develops antibodies to harmless foods. With better medicine and more technology, the part of the immune system looking for bacteria has little to do, and in the absence of parasites is capable of attack on allergens from foods, pollens and other things that would normally be harmless to us." This confirms what we've heard about the problems of bringing our children up in a world where we're constantly wiping away

all the bugs and nasties – being a hygiene freak really isn't all that 'safe'.

HYGIENE HYPOTHESIS

The idea that we're cleaning ourselves to death does seem a little drastic but the truth may not be far off. The squeaky clean homes and super-sanitised public spaces of the western world are lacking in those tasty parasites that our immune system should be busy looking for. "The fewer germs an immune system is exposed to, the more likely it is to create antibodies to fight substances that are not harmful, so we're seeing increased tendency to be allergic to substances such as pollen, peanuts and pets," says kinesiologist Alice Yuen who has been working with an increasing number of allergy sufferers.

"In theory no one should have allergies" says Hong Kong GP Sue Jamieson, "the human body is an amazing tool and is far more adaptable than we give it credit for. But today there's hundreds of external impacts like pollution, chemicals, food additives like MSG and sweeteners all chipping away at our immune system and hindering it from doing its job."

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SUPERMARKET ©ISTOCKPHOTO.COM/DON BAYLEY

CHEMICAL REACTION

As choking as it is to admit it, there's little we can do about what we inhale in the air around us. "The start of an allergy can be exposure to a chemical like bleach which causes a weakening to our immune system, making us more sensitive to things we previously had no problem dealing with" says Jamieson.

"Its not just the chemicals we're using to keep things clean that put our immune system under pressure," says Semannia Luk of Hong Kong's Natural Living, our immune system is faced with a barrage of chemicals on a daily basis. "Even at home most standard paints contain carcinogenic additives and volatile organic compounds which get released into our homes after we decorate." That would be the reason for the dizziness, headaches, eye watering and wheezing that you feel after a couple of hours of what would otherwise be therapeutic brushwork. In fact when you're redecorating or refurbishing, chemicals in the home are at an all time high. "Any new materials, floorboards, carpets, will all have been treated with chemical substances which form a chemical cocktail in your newly decorated home." Semannia warns.

Thankfully forewarned is forearmed as they say, and no this doesn't mean another excuse to get away from doing the cleaning. There are plenty of organic and chemical free alternatives available to the brands we've become familiar with which we can use to reduce the toxicity of the air in

our homes. From natural paint and cleaning products to organic options for fabrics and furnishings, many health food shop stock eco-friendly brands and some are finally starting to creep onto our supermarket shelves.

PRESERVATIVES & PROCESSED FOOD

In the same way that our immune system struggles to stay in tip top condition when its dealing with the chemicals in our external environment, many fast foods are loaded with preservatives, colourings and chemicals, not to mention hormones and steroids fed to the animals consumed by the meat eaters amongst us. By bombarding our bodies with toxins, we create a body imbalance and allergic reactions to preservatives become more frequent. "All these environmental factors are causing our immune system to overreact. To combat an allergy we need to stop this overreaction by boosting our immune system to bring our body back into balance," says Jennifer Lewin who specialises in using Integrative Manual Therapy (IMT) to treat allergies and gluten sensitivity at Hong Kong's Balance Health.

Today we're pretty spoilt for choice when it comes to the variety of foods available to us, but it's not necessarily the choice that's the problem. "Mankind has been eating wheat and dairy for millennia" Jamieson says "the problem is we eat too much of the same things." Most of us aim to have a balanced diet, but balanced doesn't always

mean varied. Challenged to think of the last time we went a day without eating some kind of wheat or dairy and I think most of us would struggle.

FIGHTING BACK

There are many factors at play affecting the sensitivity of our immune system, digestive tract and the internal organs that process what we eat. There can be a genetic predisposition to what are known as atopic allergies like asthma or eczema, but as Dr Jamieson explains, "Being susceptible to an allergy has a lot to do with the condition our body is in when we put the food inside us."

A 100 percent healthy immune system will have no problem fending off the unnatural nasties that we throw at it. However like any defense system that's being constantly bombarded, it's going to take a battering over time. The truth is, more often than not our bodies don't have the chance to repair the often 'invisible' damage caused by simply living and breathing.

That said, this is not something you need to spend every waking moment of your day worrying about. Just making sure you're taking responsibility for leading a healthy life is enough. "You don't have to live caffeine and alcohol free, or give up chocolate cake or ice cream," says Jamieson, "its just about just being mindful of maintaining a balanced diet and relaxation and exercise regime."

ALLERGY DETECTION

There are various types of allergy testing which carry varying degrees of accuracy depending on the patient, so it's a good idea to speak to your GP if you think you have an allergy so they can recommend an appropriate course of action. "Imbalances that weaken the immune system can be an underlying cause of some food allergies," says Kinesiologist Alice Yuen, who has successfully treated and cured adults and children suffering with allergies. "Identifying the foods which cause a reaction is just the first step to combating those allergies." Lewin agrees saying, "avoiding things you know cause a reaction can help your immune system to start repairing the damage". She and other experts also believe that supplements can help the damaged parts of your digestive system to repair themselves.

TREATMENT METHODS

If you think you have an allergy there are several effective methods of detection and treatment. Of course very few things in life are 100 percent accurate but there are a number of ways you can test for allergies depending on whether you're a believer in conventional or more enlightened medicine.

TRIED AND TESTED:

ELISA (Enzyme-Linked Immunosorbent Assay)

The ELISA allergy test can be used to detect both immediate and delayed allergic responses by testing the amount of IgE or IgG antibodies in the blood. The great thing about this test is that only a pin-prick sample of blood is needed to test for a variety of potential allergens at the same time. Hong Kong's HK Biotek can send finger prick blood tests to your door for home blood sample collection. All you need to do is collect the sample, pick whether you want to be tested for the Asian or standard food panel and pop it in the post.

The Asian panel includes less dairy and grain items than the standard foods but more typically Asian foods and spices. The only downside to the groupings is that you can't mix and match – Asian or standard test items are a set package. The full results of your test will be sent from their USA based laboratory to your home within two weeks when a dietician will contact you to explain the results and assist with any dietary adaptations or exclusions that you might need to



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make or suggest dietary supplements. ELISA testing can also assess sensitivity to inhaled allergens and environmental pollutants. www.hkbiotek.com

KINESIOLOGY/NAET

This is a completely non-invasive testing technique that involves the practitioner placing a small vial on the body and then using Muscle Response Testing (MRT) to indicate sensitivities. Once identified, the

practitioner gently stimulates acupressure points along the spine (your central nervous system) rebalancing the energy blockage while in contact with the offending substance (stored in a small vial), reprogramming the brain and nervous system to be neutral to the offending substance. Once cleared, which is indicated by a strong MRT, the allergen must then be completely avoided for 25 hours following the treatment.

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allergies defined

FOOD ALLERGY: A food allergy develops when the body's immune system becomes misdirected and attacks harmless food proteins. Once the immune system decides that a particular food is harmful, it creates specific antibodies to it. The next time the individual eats that food; the immune system releases chemicals such as histamine, in order to protect the body.

FOOD INTOLERANCE: Is an adverse reaction to a food that does not involve the immune system.

ALLERGENS: Food allergens are proteins within food that enter your bloodstream after food is digested. From there, they go to target organs, such as your skin or nose, and cause allergic reactions.

ALLERGIC REACTIONS: While any food can cause allergies, 90 percent of all food allergic reactions are caused by eggs, shellfish, peanuts, fish, soy, wheat, milk and nuts from trees (e.g. walnuts, pecans). Allergic symptoms involve the digestive, skin, and/or respiratory systems. Reactions can range from the immediate such as swelling of the throat to irritable bowel syndrome and even depression.

tips for reducing your chemical exposure

- Consider going wheat / gluten free
- Try cutting out dairy
- Reduce chemicals at home by using chemical free laundry detergent, cleaning products and paints
- Clean your air conditioning filter regularly
- Eat organic food
- Wear organic clothes
- Detoxify with yoga
- Reduce the contact your food has with synthetic packaging and containers.

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