

ALLERGY AND ASTHMA

Hay fever is a chronic condition characterized by sneezing, nasal congestion, runny and itching nose, palate, ears and eyes. If you recognize any of these symptoms chances are, you or some member of your family has experienced hay fever at one time or another.

Doctors call it allergic rhinitis. Most people know it as hay fever and if you've got it - - as 22 million Americans do - - you're likely to be plagued during the spring and fall seasons by such annoying symptoms as sneezing, congestion, runny nose, itchy throat and red, watery eyes. Allergy has different names. Allergy reactions occurring in the nose and sinus are called "sinus" or "hay fever" or "allergic rhinitis." And when allergy reactions occur in the chest we call it "asthma." Allergy reactions in the skin are named "hives" or "angioedema." So you see, allergy has different names depending upon where in your body it occurs.

One out of every six Americans suffers from an allergic condition. Allergy is an inherited trait, a genetic susceptibility towards the production of certain allergy anti-bodies.

Hay fever is basically an allergic reaction to pollens from trees, weed and grasses. Unlike garden flower pollen, which is carried by insects, the dry lightweight pollens which cause allergic rhinitis are generally spread by wind currents which make them difficult to avoid. In fact, samples of ragweed pollen have been found 400 miles at sea! While most people suffer mild discomfort with hay fever, it is estimated that more than 40 percent of the 5.8 million children who have respiratory allergies miss some school, stay in bed or feel upset by the condition.

Additionally, complications from allergic rhinitis can be serious. The same allergens that cause hay fever can reach the lungs causing asthma and other complications. Sinusitis (inflammation of the sinus cavities) and nasal polyps (small outgrowths of the mucous membrane of the nose) may develop. Secondary infections of the ear, larynx and bronchial tubes may occur. Also, prolonged year-round nasal stuffiness and mouth breathing may lead to facial bone growth changes in children.

Surprisingly, many parents realize that their children have asthma before their physicians do. An accurate diagnosis, however, is most important in helping to determine an appropriate individualized treatment program. Physicians specializing in allergy/immunology have special skills in the area of asthma management. The allergy and asthma specialist will detect and determine those environmental elements (pollens, molds, dust mites, animal danders, workplace chemicals) which may be the cause of a patient's asthmatic condition. A careful medical history, physical examination, selective allergy skill testing and lung function studies are typically performed. Occasionally, blood tests, home and workplace evaluations, and x-rays of the sinuses and lungs are

required.

Unlike hay fever, asthma is a more complex disease involving a reversible constriction of the muscles lining the human airways,. It is more often associated with allergy immune cells and can get progressively worse reaching life-threatening stages if not properly controlled. It can be treated more effectively when it is diagnosed early.

The best therapy of all, however, is avoidance of those things which produce asthma symptoms. This includes allergens, such as house dust mites, pets and irritants, such as tobacco smoke and chemical fumes.