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Living with Allergies & Asthma

Allergies and asthma are nothing to sneeze about! Join the "Breath-taking Club" and learn to control them.

Kurt Grote says he must have been "a funny sight." He was a skinny, asthmatic boy of 12 with glasses and braces. For Halloween, he had dressed up as an Olympic gold medal winner. "I wore red, white, and blue sweats, and gold-colored medals," he remembers. He had no idea that one day he would be a true Olympian, wearing real team sweats and a genuine Olympic gold medal around his neck.

Grote has had asthma since he was six months old. "I've never known life with out asthma," he says. At school his classmates labeled him "the sick kid." He started swimming because his doctor thought it would help him strengthen his lungs.

Breathe Easy

What is asthma? Asthma is a disease that affects the lungs. Normally you inhale (breathe in) and exhale (breathe out) air easily. The lungs take in oxygen from the air and release carbon' dioxide.

But asthma makes the lungs red and swollen. Some air gets trapped there. People cannot inhale as much air as they need. Also, pathways leading to the lungs get narrow. Smooth muscle squeezes the pathways. This makes them even more narrow. Meanwhile, mucus in the lungs thickens. Sometimes a person's breathing sounds like whistling. That's because the air has to force its way through tiny pathways.

Asthma goes hand-in-hand with allergies. One-third of people with allergies eventually develop asthma. Both illnesses result from overactive immune systems. A normal immune system fights bacteria and viruses. An overactive immune system fights off normally harmless stuff, such as pollens, dust, or certain foods.

Unfriendly foods?

Allergies are common. They affect about 50 million Americans and cost about \$18 billion a year to treat. And the numbers get higher each year. Genes are one cause, says Andrew Saxon, M.D., chief of UCLA's allergy center. But so are air pollution and airtight homes, which trap allergens (AL-er-jenz; things that cause allergic reactions).

Take food allergies. Nearly million Americans have them. Food allergies can cause mild problems, such as headaches. Or the effects can be serious. Deaths do occur, but they are rare.

People with food allergies must learn to read labels carefully. Does that loaf of bread contain any wheat flour? Better check the label on the package. They should ask questions when eating out, too. Are there shrimp in the egg rolls? Were they fried in peanut oil? Better ask someone who knows for sure before ordering. Anne Muñoz-Furlong, founder of the Food Allergy & Anaphylaxis (an-uh-fuh-LAX-iss; a severe allergic reaction) Network, says that 90 percent of food allergies are to tree nuts (almonds, walnuts, pecans), peanuts, fish, shellfish, eggs, milk, soy, and wheat.

Anyone with a serious food or other allergy should carry a special device such as the EpiPen®. It can be used to inject the proper dose of medicine to stop a reaction. He or she should also wear a special medical alert bracelet or necklace. Other triggers for serious reactions in some people are medicines such as penicillin (an antibiotic) and insect stings.

inside and Outside

Outside allergens include pollen, pesticides, pollution, and gasoline fumes. Plant pollens, for instance, may trigger hay fever. Pollen enters the nose, lungs, and eyes and causes symptoms. Many kids with hay fever sneeze and cough. They may have itchy, watery eyes. Others develop middle ear infections.

Indoors, kids face dust mites, mold, cockroaches, pets, soaps, perfumes, secondhand smoke, and cleaning products. Kids allergic to these things usually sneeze, wheeze, cough, or itch. The best advice is to stay away from any triggers. You can do this pretty easily with foods. Stop eating eggs, for example, if they give you hives. Or say no to strawberries if you break out in a rash.

No one, though, can totally avoid dust, pollen, or animals. But you can hang around them less. That means vacuuming your bedroom more often. It also means staying indoors on days when pollen counts are high.

Thomas A. Platts-Mills, M.D., of the University of Virginia, doesn't advise giving away the family cat unless the allergic person wheezes and tests positive on skin tests for cats. If you are a dog lover, stick to pups that don't shed, such as poodles and schnauzers.

Sneezy and Grumpy

Sometimes self-help is not enough. Many people also take medications. Others get shots from a special doctor called an allergist (AL-er-jist). The allergist takes your medical history and examines your eyes, nose, and throat. He or she will also ask you about your symptoms.

The doctor may want an X-ray of your lungs. He or she may want blood or "skin prick" tests. In a skin prick test, a small needle pricks the skin on your arm and leaves behind an allergen. Any itching 20 minutes later means you may be allergic to that allergen.

Many allergists prescribe medications first, such as antihistamines (ant-ih-HIST-uh-minz) to help with symptoms. People with stubborn symptoms may need shots. The shots make your body react less to the allergen.

In a few years, people may receive a new treatment. It would prevent the release of

histamines (HIST-uh-minz). These are chemicals that the body releases during an allergic reaction. They cause the unpleasant symptoms.

Attacking Asthma

Asthma cases have increased by 75 percent since 1980, according to the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (NIAID). Asthma affects about 17 million Americans. More children have asthma than adults.

Why is the number of cases growing? The NIAID is not sure. But researchers believe it's due to genes and the environment. Environmental triggers may cause asthma. Allergens such as dust mites and cockroaches and their droppings can trigger attacks. Other common triggers are tobacco smoke, air pollution, and exercise. Even viruses, stuffed-up sinuses, and acid passing from the stomach into the esophagus (ee-SAHF-uh-gus; the tube leading to the stomach) will trigger symptoms.

Kids and adults with asthma depend on medicines. Some kinds help with coughing, wheezing, and other noisy sounds. Other medicines treat the redness and soreness (the quiet symptoms). People usually use inhalers that spray a dose of medicine into the lungs.

real People

Some people with asthma or allergies are famous athletes. Kurt Grote is just one of them. Joanna Zeiger, a world-class triathlete, copes with asthma caused by exercise.

Tom Poti was a member of the U.S. hockey team in the 2002 Winter Olympics. Now he's a New York Ranger. Tom is allergic to peanuts and fish. Jackie Joyner-Kersey won three gold medals in track despite having asthma.

"I used to worry that other kids would think I was soft," says Dennis Rodman, champion rebounder and retired basketball star. "Accept asthma as part of your life. But don't let it keep you from working toward your goals."

Other famous people who had asthma include Presidents Theodore Roosevelt and John F. Kennedy. Composer Ludwig van Beethoven and author Charles Dickens also suffered from asthma.

Kyle Damitz, regular Kid

Kyle Damitz, 13, of Chicago, has allergies and asthma. Like Kurt Grote, he developed asthma as a baby. Kyle takes medicines and uses inhalers every morning. He also uses his inhaler at school when he needs it. The school nurse helps him use a nebulizer (NEB-you-lize-er; a device for inhaling liquid medication) for bad attacks. And he gets shots every month.

Kyle has a lot to say about his asthma and how he controls it. "I'm allergic to pollen, mold, dust, and animals with fur," he explains. "I'm also sensitive to air pollution. If I have an attack outside, I sit down for 10 minutes. Or I use my inhaler."

"I haven't had to go to the hospital for five years," he adds. "It's because I control my attacks with medications. I also try to stay away from triggers. But that's hard. Running can trigger an attack once in a while. But I still go to PE class. And I [in-line skate] and play on a soccer team."

Kyle manages to live an active life in spite of the challenges he faces. "Asthma changes your life," he admits. "Sometimes I get 'down.' But my parents still let me bowl, go to the

zoo, and live an active life. The toughest thing is not going on sleepovers. It's usually because there's a dog in the house. I know I have a serious disease, but my parents taught me not to use it as an excuse."

Looking Ahead

Researchers like Ken Adams, M.D., of the National Institutes of Health, want doctors to look at asthma differently. Doctors should not think of asthma as one disease, he believes. They should think of asthma as separate diseases with separate triggers. Researchers who do that may find better ways to control asthma.

In the meantime, there are plenty of things people with asthma can do to live healthy, active lives.

Take ACTION Danger Ahead!

When does an asthma attack become a life-or-death emergency? Call 9-1-1 or go to the hospital if

- the person can't speak.
- the person has chest pains.
- breathing is very difficult.
- lips, tongue, or fingernails are turning blue.
- the person is only partly conscious.

Ten Triggers

Here are some common triggers for asthma:

- Cigarette smoke
- Pollen
- House dust mites
- Very hot weather or very cold weather
- Pets
- Stress
- Mold
- Air pollution
- Foods
- Other illnesses (a cold, bronchitis)

A Clean Sweep

Do you have allergies or asthma? Does anyone in your household? People with allergies and asthma can react to many things. And the bedroom is a "hot spot." Which of these things do you do to zap allergy triggers?

Put an "x" below by any method you use.

- 1. Wash your bedding in hot water once a week.
- 2. Get rid of feather pillows.
- 3. Use pillow covers designed to keep out dust mites.
- 4. Remove carpeting. Replace it with wood, tile, or linoleum.
- 5. Damp mop or damp dust hard surfaces.
- 6. Repair the cause of any damp spots in the room,
- 7. Use a vacuum cleaner with a HEPA filter.
- 8. Wash your curtains often.
- 9. Hang up a sign outside your room that says "smoke-free zone."
- 10. Keep humidity below 50 percent to discourage mold.
- 11. Clean up after you eat food.
- 12. Keep your windows closed during allergy season.

For More Information

Food Allergy & Anaphylaxis Network www.fankids.org and <http://fankids.org/FANTeen>
American Lung Association www.lungusa.com American Academy of Allergy, Asthma, and Immunology www.aaaai.org

PHOTO (COLOR): Kyle Damitz

PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE): Beethoven

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By Janice Arenofsky

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