

WHAT'S UP DOC PETE?

For the first time this spring I have a runny nose and sinus headaches which I guess is allergies. How can I tell if I have allergies?



Peter J. Muran, MD

You are not alone.

In fact 20 percent of Americans suffer from seasonal allergies not including year-round sufferers with a broad range of reactions. The mystery is why that number is growing dramatically every year.

There are two theories why allergies are an increasing health problem. One is that since the standards of health for infectious disease has improved over the last decades, our immune system is no longer occupied with fighting as many infectious diseases and has become misdirected to reacting to benign elements in our environment such as foods and pollens. The second theory and the one I find more plausible is that our systems are increasingly assaulted with unnatural elements to the point where we have a toxic overload and our immune system has become hypersensitive and reacts to common, benign elements. Since World War II approximately 87,000 new chemicals have been synthesized in the US alone. New ones are being invented at the rate of at least 2000 a year. The creation of the EPA is in recognition that many of these chemicals are toxic to life. It has been our observation in our practice that people who never had allergies can develop allergies and sensitivities in their thirties and even more in their late forties. We think this can be attributed to an accumulation of toxins over time to a point of toxic load which ignites the immune system into hyper sensitivity. In addition this increased sensitivity in midlife is enhanced by hormonal changes which can contribute to instability in the foundation of our health.

Allergies and sensitivities are difficult to distinguish. True allergies are defined as an abnormal immune response a benign substance or allergen, such as food or natural environmental elements like pollen, which does not normally cause a reaction and results in a broad range of inflammatory immune responses such as swelling, itching, respiratory congestion, asthma and eczema. Sensitivities are a susceptibility to a substance which may lead to physiological disturbances in a number of ways including migraines, canker sores, lethargy, weight gain and cloudy thinking.

Either way, allergies or sensitivities can make life miserable. In my next column I will discuss how both conventional and integrated approaches to allergies can improve the quality of life.



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