

Allergy test is worth the trouble

BY NANCY DEVINE
Correspondent

If you suffer from seasonal environmental allergies, the coming of spring doesn't delight you in the same way it does other people. Sure, it's nice to be able to go out without a coat, but that's about it. As trees and plants bloom, your eyes water and itch, you sneeze, cough and possibly break out in hives. Oh yeah, spring has sprung alright.

Allergic reactions are the immune system's response to intruders like pollen, dusts or mould spores. Those who are allergic to any of these environmental pollutants produce an antibody called immunoglobulin (IgE) which is designed to attack the invaders.

Histamine, which is released in response to the presence of IgE, irritates the nose, eyes and throat, causing internal swelling. The nose produces extra mucus and you feel awful.

Reams of research indicate allergies tend to run in families. A person with one parent who has allergies has about a 25 per cent chance of having them, too. If both parents are allergic, the chances climb to about 66 per cent. If hay fever is a family problem, 65 per cent of the time everybody in the house has it.

Over the counter, and sometimes even prescription, medications can relieve the symptoms of many allergy sufferers. Avoidance of pollutants can also sometimes help, especially shutting the windows in the early evening, when pollen counts are typically higher.

'It is better to know what you are allergic to. Don't worry about the test. It is just a little pin prick really and it might get really itchy, but it really doesn't hurt.'

Sometimes, however, doctors advise highly allergic people to begin a treatment program which includes allergy shots. The shots, given at regular intervals, contain minute traces of the allergen. The theory is that repeated and controlled exposure to the allergy causing substance will break down the body's sensitivity.

Laura Snape, 10, hates her allergy shots, but they are helping her overcome a major allergy to dust mites. The Grade 4 student at Aurora's Regency Acres Public School gets her allergy shot once a week at her doctor's office. Her mom, Brenda, says getting her to the office is often a major battle.

"Well, it hurts," explained Laura. "My arm really swells up for awhile."

Laura's allergy odyssey began when she was five years old. The family wanted to get a cat and her mom decided she should be tested to make sure she wasn't allergic. Playing with a visiting cat in the backyard always seemed to bring on itchy eyes and a runny nose.

"The testing didn't really hurt," said Laura. "They just put little dots of the stuff you might be allergic to on your back. Then there's like a sharp poke in the back. They drew a smiley face for me to look at so I wasn't scared."

The scratch test revealed sensitivity to cats and dust. The family got a dog.

Last year, though, things changed. Laura started coughing, a dry, deep cough that simply would not go away. She was tested extensively for asthma, but didn't have it. A second scratch test revealed her cat allergy had become mild in comparison with her reaction to dust and dust mites. Shots were recommended.

In a recent U.S. study, dust mites were named as one of the major culprits of environmental allergies in that country.

The mite, a distant cousin to the spider, is microscopic and lives in mattresses, carpets, draperies and stuffed animals. It feeds off dead human skin cells, but poses no physical threat to humans who are not allergic to them.

Specifically formulated to Laura's needs, her allergy serum (enough for four months) is delivered to her family's home. The cost is covered by a prescription medical plan, but it is kept at her doctor's office, since only a doctor can give the shot.

The cough is becoming less annoying to both Laura and those around her. Her mom washes her bedding weekly in hot water. She only vacuums when Laura is at school, so dust isn't blown around. There are also plans to get an air cleaner installed.

This year, Laura will have a weekly allergy shot. Next year, the schedule shifts to every other week. After that, she will be reassessed to determine if the shots have done their job or if she will have to keep up the regimen.

"It is better to know what you are allergic to," she said. "Don't worry about the test. It is just a little pin prick really and it might get really itchy, but it really doesn't hurt."

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