



GENERAL CONSIDERATIONS OF THE ALLERGY STATE

Allergy may be defined as an abnormal reaction (sensitivity) in some portion of the body to substances from the outside world. Such substances may be taken into the body through the nose and lungs (pollens, molds, house dust, animal dander, etc.), by mouth (foods, drinks, medications, etc.), or through the skin (by contact with woolen clothing, animals, rugs, plants, chemicals, injections, etc.). Any substance to which an individual is allergic is called an allergen and has the potential in that individual to cause symptoms if encountered or ingested.

The most common allergic diseases are hay fever, some forms of asthma, eczema, hives and some forms of chronic “stuffy nose”. An allergic person may have only one of these problems, such as hay fever, he may suffer from one disease at one time in his life and a different disease at a later time, or he may have two or more of these problems coexisting together. An important point to remember is that once you have had an allergic problem, you are at risk for developing others.

You are not born with an allergy to a specific substance. Rather, you are born with the capacity (genetic predisposition) to develop an allergy and with repeated exposure it becomes acquired. Therefore, many specific allergies can be prevented if in infancy and early childhood they are anticipated and exposure limited.

The final consideration to remember is that the allergic symptoms you or your child are experiencing are the sum total of many factors. First, allergen exposure has a cumulative effect; like water behind a dam, it builds up gradually then “spills over” as allergic symptoms. Also, your general state of health, coexisting infections, contact with irritating substances and emotional stress can all contribute to the presence and degree of “allergic” symptoms.

The main purpose of your visit to an allergist is to learn how to control you or your child’s symptoms, whether due to allergic substances or not. The allergist’s function is to learn the causes of your symptoms and then use this information to help you. Of the many tools the allergist has at his disposal, skin testing with potential “allergen” is the most useful. It serves as a means of both identifying in you or your child a genetic potential for allergic disease and pointing out those allergens which may be the culprits. Once the allergies are known, an attempt to cure the allergic disease can be made by removing the offending substance from contact with the patient. Unfortunately, many allergic substances cannot be avoided fully. Airborne allergens such as house dust, mold and plant pollens are difficult to eliminate entirely in a practical manner. In such cases, allergy treatments, that is “shots” are necessary to help build up the patient’s resistance to the effects of exposure to these substances. This approach can be combined with the occasional or daily use of medicines prescribed by your doctor.