

Special Interest Articles:

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- ALLERGIES AND HERBS
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Itchy Allergy Eyes

When eyes become dry, irritated and inflamed, it is called xerosis—and it is one of the symptoms of vitamin A deficiency. It turns out that taking a small amount of vitamin A each day. (It is given short term, because vitamin A

can be toxic—in fact you should get professional advice), often alleviates this symptom. When patients have irritated, itchy eyes during hay fever season, vitamin A supplementation often works miraculously.

Prenatal Diet and Allergies

According to the American Academy of Allergy and Immunology, a child's chance of developing allergies is 25% if one parent has allergies and 66% if both parents have allergies. In research appearing in Medical Tribune (July 23, 1992;30), breast feeding mothers were able to reduce the chances that their babies will develop allergies by eating a low-allergen diet. The subjects of the study were 58 mothers and infants from families with a history of allergies, and their babies. The infants in the study were being breast fed; they were divided into two groups. Another group of 62 mothers and babies served as a control. In the test group, the mothers were placed on a hypoallergenic diet.

For one year, the mothers in the test group avoided common allergens like eggs, dairy, fish, nuts, wheat or citrus. Their homes were treated with products to control dust mites.

At the end of the year, 40% of the infants in the control group developed allergies. Only 13% of the infants in the test group developed allergies. The test group also had a lower incidence of asthma, 7% compared to 19% in the control group. The study found that restricting the mother's diet can lead to fewer allergies in children. Parental smoking is a huge risk factor for children to develop allergies.

Diet and Allergies

Margarine consumption was associated with increased wheezing and allergic rhinitis.

Research appearing in the journal *Thorax* (2007;62:677-683) studied children in rural Crete and the relationship between asthma and allergy with diet. It was a cross-sectional survey involving 690 children between the ages of 7 and 18. Allergic and respiratory symptoms were determined by a questionnaire filled out by the parents. They were also given skin tests for 10 common airborne allergens. A food frequency questionnaire was given to determine adherence to a

Mediterranean diet, using a scale with 12 dietary items.

It was found that 80% of the children ate fresh fruit and 68% ate fresh vegetables at least twice each day. A high grapes, oranges, apples and fresh tomatoes did not seem to lower the incidence of allergy, but did lower the incidence of wheezing and rhinitis. Similarly, consumption of nuts seemed to be associated with less wheezing. Margarine consumption was associated with increased wheezing and allergic rhinitis.

Allergies and Herbs

There are several herbs that have a good track record of alleviating allergic symptoms.

Fritillaria thunbergii: (*Fritillaria*) is an antitussive herb and is a potent cough suppressant. It has a broncho-dilation effect and inhibits mucosal secretions. *Fritillaria*'s traditional use is for relief of coughs and dyspnea (The Pharmacology of Chinese Herbs, pg 275-6). *Fritillaria* tends to act in a manner that is similar to dexamethasone, which is used to treat nasal allergy and inflammation.

Solidago virgaurea supplies flavonoids, saponins and phenol glycosides. *S. virgaurea* is primarily used to promote the loss of water (aqueoretic agent) from the body.

Scutellaria baicalensis (Baikal Scullcap) possesses anti-inflammatory, anti-bacterial, and anti-allergic properties

Euphrasia officinalis (Eyebright) – The German Commission E Monographs lists uses of Eyebright which include inflamed eyes, coughs, colds and catarrh (inflammation of mucous membrane). It is useful if an allergic response is the basis for sinusitis (Clinical Botanical Medicine, pg

209).

Morus alba (White Mulberry) In Chinese Medicine, *M. alba* is used to tonify the blood and enrich the yin (Chinese Herbal Medicines Materia Medica, pg 334-5). It is used as a tonic and as an expectorant for asthma, bronchitis, cold and cough and dyspepsia. The fruit also contains a significant amount of resveratrol. Interestingly, the leaves happen to be the primary food source for the silkworm.

Platycodon grandiflorum (Chinese bellflower). Traditional uses are to dispel phlegm, to ventilate the lungs, and to relieve sore throat. In traditional Chinese Medicine, it is often used in combination in order to direct the actions of other herbs to the upper body.

Albizia julibrissin (Silk Tree) has sweet, neutral properties and contains saponins and tannins. It is calming, i.e. it "calms the spirit" (Chinese Herbal Medicine Materia Medica, pg 406-7). Considered an "auspicious tree," it is used as a tonic and anthelmintic or vermifuge (Li Shih-Chen, Chinese Medicinal Herbs, pg 22-3).

Are You Ready for Allergy Season?

Allergies are the sixth leading cause of chronic disease in the United States, costing the health care system \$18 billion each year (compared to \$6 billion spent in 2000). Between 9% and 15% of all Americans have hay fever--and this promises to be a bad year for them. Because of the mild winter and the early onset of warm weather, pollen levels are expected to be at an all-time high and it is expected that people with hay fever will really suffer from their symptoms this year.

In general, allergies are on the rise. More than 50 million Americans suffer with allergies and nearly 55% of Americans test positive for one or more allergens. Research appearing in the August, 2005 issue of the *Journal of Allergy and Clinical Immunology* found that of 10,500 subjects tested, more than 50% were sensitive to at least one of ten common allergens. This is double the percentage of individuals tested for allergies 30 years ago.

Medical treatment of allergies is directed at symptoms, but they may undermine the general health and make the underlying cause of the allergy worse. Nasal sprays, for example, irritate the mucus membranes. In response to the irritation, the membranes produce more mucus. The spray actually aggravates the problem that it is designed to solve. Side-effects of the common antihistamines include fatigue, dry mouth and headaches.

The biggest problem with drug therapy is that it does not address the cause of the allergy. Drugs have been the mainstay of allergy treatment, but the number of people with allergies keeps increasing and symptoms keep getting worse.

Research published in *Science News* (1994;145:324) raises the question of whether the antihistamines we take for allergies be linked to cancer. Studies in mice have shown that antihistamines promote the growth of malignant tumors. In February, 1994, the Department of Health and Human Services noted an increase in the incidence of cancer in the United States. Scientists at the University of Manitoba believe that the consumption of various medications, including antihistamines and antidepressants, may increase the risk for cancer and may be part of the reason for the increase. They have demonstrated that drugs like Elavil, Claritin, Hismanal, Atarax, Unisom, Prozac, NyQuil and Reactine have all created tumors in animal studies. Some antihistamines behave like the drug DPPE, which has been linked to enhancing tumor growth, by binding to histamine receptors, which interferes with enzymes designed to detoxify and remove poisons from the body. This will also interfere with the system that regulates cell growth. The drugs do not necessarily cause cancer, but can enhance the growth of cancer.

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Triglycerides

A triglyceride molecule consists of a glycerol molecule with three fatty acids attached. After a meal, your body converts calories it does not need to triglycerides. Your body uses them for energy. Eating more calories than you can use, especially in the form of refined carbohydrates, can cause your triglycerides to become elevated. High triglycerides can increase the risk for heart disease and may be a sign of the metabolic syndrome or type 2 diabetes.

The connection between high triglycerides and eating sugar and refined carbohydrate consumption is pretty well established. One study that appeared in the *Proceedings of the Society for Experimental Biology and Medicine* (2000;225:178-183) demonstrated that increased sugar consumption was linked to higher triglycerides.

Avoiding refined carbohydrate, avoiding alcohol and doing some light exercise are all good strategies to lower triglycerides. Taking omega-3 fatty acids is a very well-researched way to lower triglycerides. A study that appeared in the *American Journal of Clinical Nutrition* (1993;58:68-74), showed that taking omega-3 fatty acids lowered postprandial triglyceride levels. Fish oil was also recommended in the *Canadian Medical Association Journal* (1991;145(7):821) for the treatment of high triglycerides.

There is some research that demonstrates the value of taking garlic

to lower triglycerides. A meta-analysis of controlled studies appeared in the *Journal of the Science of Food and Agriculture* (epublished ahead of print, Jan 10, 2012) included 26 studies that demonstrated the value of garlic in reducing both cholesterol and high triglycerides.

A double-blind, placebo-controlled study appeared in the *American Journal of Cardiology* (epublished ahead of print June 15, 2011). The subjects were 229 patients with high triglyceride levels (500-2000) with fasting. Subjects were given an omega-3 fatty acid supplement (either 4 grams per day or 2 grams per day of a product containing 96% of the ethyl ester of EPA) or a placebo. Overall, patients with triglycerides higher than 750 at the start of the trial, experienced a 45.4% reduction when taking 4 grams per day of the EPA. Those taking 2 grams per day had a 32.9% reduction. The authors of the study concluded that the EPA supplement "significantly reduced the triglyceride levels and improved other lipid parameters without significantly increasing the LDL cholesterol levels.

If we consider the role of sugar and refined carbohydrate in elevating triglycerides, avoiding high glycemic foods is a very good idea. Also, supplementing to help bring sugar and insulin under control is a good idea.

Cleanliness and Allergies

A study published in the *British Medical Journal* (May 22, 2004, Vol. 328, p. 1223) seems to support the idea that raising children in too sterile of an environment may contribute to allergies. Children who spent a lot of time with microbes (for example, children who live around pets or farm animals) are less likely to develop allergic rashes than children who do not have this exposure. This same

benefit was not derived from getting infectious diseases such as colds and diarrhea. Infectious diseases seemed to increase the likelihood of developing rashes. Having a large number of siblings seems to protect against allergy, but if this study is right, it's not because siblings pass on infectious diseases.

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Do Antibiotics Cause Allergies?

A study conducted at Henry Ford Hospital in Detroit, Michigan shows that children given antibiotics in their first six months of life have an increased risk of allergies to ragweed, pets, grass, and dust mites. They also have an increased risk of asthma. Christine Cole Johnson, Ph.D., is the study's lead author and senior research epidemiologist for Henry Ford's Department of Biostatistics & Research Epidemiology. She says that she is not against children receiving antibiotics, but believes that prudence is necessary before prescribing them for children at such an early age.

Many antibiotics have been prescribed unnecessarily, especially for viral infections like colds and the flu when they would have no effect anyway. Dr. Johnson postulates that the antibiotics may alter the immune system by affecting the GI tract.

Data was collected on 448 children from before birth until seven years of age. Almost half (49%) of the children received antibiotics within the first six months of life. Children given antibiotics once in the first six months of life were 1.5 times more likely to suffer from allergies and 2.5 times more likely to have asthma than children who were not given antibiotics. If the mother had a history of allergies, the children given antibiotics were twice as likely to develop allergies as the non-antibiotic group. If the child was breast-fed and given antibiotics, the chance of developing allergies was four times greater than the non-antibiotic group. Breast feeding did not increase the incidence of asthma.

A Natural Approach to Allergies

Healing is a matter of time, but it is sometimes also a matter of opportunity.—

Hippocrates

Allergy symptoms are basically due to inflammation, so addressing core health issues, like diet, will improve them. Researchers in Finland found that the type of fats consumed in the diet was related to the tendency to develop allergic symptoms. The results were published in the journal *Allergy* (2001;56:425-428).

Other research, appearing in the journal *Thorax* (2007;62:677-683) found a relationship between the occurrence of asthma and allergies, and diet. A Mediterranean type of diet, high in fresh produce, is associated with less of an allergic response. Produce is high in flavonoids. Flavonoids are plant antioxidants (found in fresh produce) that have anti-inflammatory and anti-tumor activity.

The *Journal of Agriculture and Food Chemistry* (2006; 54(14):

5203-7) noted that flavonoids reduced inflammatory substances in allergy patients.

In general, taking omega-3 fatty acids is also beneficial. Research that appeared in the *Journal of Allergy and Clinical Immunology* (December, 2003;112(6):1178-84) found that pregnant women who took omega-3 fatty acids were less likely to have babies with allergies than women who did not take omega-3 fatty acids.

Even exercise plays a role. A study, published in *Allergy* (Vol. 61, No. 11, November 2006: 1310-1315) looked at exercise and activity levels in 1,700 German children over a period of 12 years. At the start of the study, 6% of the children were completely sedentary. At the end of the 12 years, the sedentary children were 50% more likely to develop hay fever.

