

While it is important in many instances to calm inflammation, the inflammatory response has a constant, every-day positive role to play, explains Dr. Gurdev (Dave) Judge, founder of the Allergy, Asthma & Sinus Center in Cary, with offices, as well, in North Raleigh and Wake Forest.

“Actually,” he says, “inflammation is an essential part of the functioning of a normal lung. Tiny areas of inflammation are constantly at work to combat the viruses, bacteria, and the host of pollutants that we inhale in our lungs. Often these foreign, unwelcome objects stick to the surface of our airways, and the body uses the inflammatory response of IgE—immunoglobulin E—to break down these invaders and remove them.”

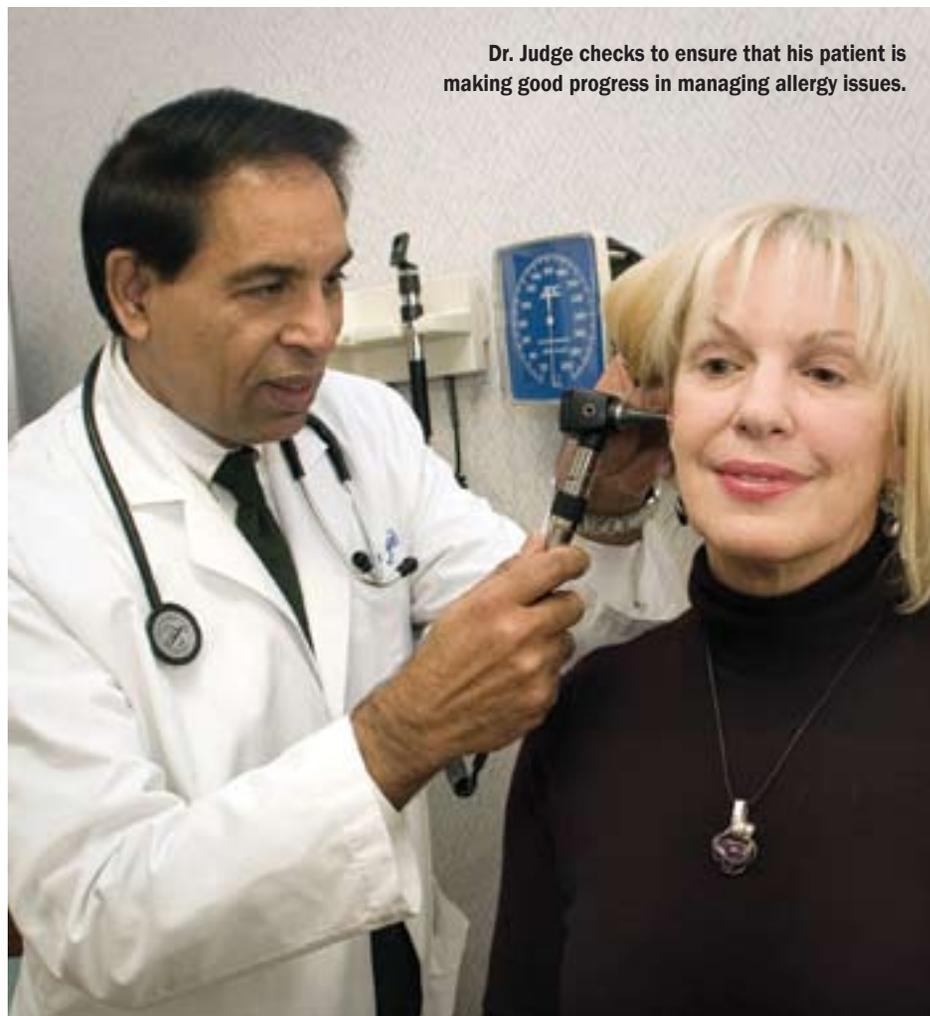
IgE is a natural substance in the body that binds to allergens and then triggers release of chemicals that cause inflammation.

But some people who are prone to asthma, Dr. Judge explains, “over-react to some factors, aggravating inflammation throughout their airways—possibly, in part, because they over-produce unique IgE antibodies in response to these factors. The consequence can be a full-blown asthma attack.”

STRESS AND ANXIETY

And there are times when other issues may mask as asthma.

Dr. Judge recalls working with a 28-year-old woman who, early one evening, without warning, had great difficulty breathing, a fact that quickly precipitated a highly stressful panic attack.



Dr. Judge checks to ensure that his patient is making good progress in managing allergy issues.

Inflammation Helps *Normal Immune Response*

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She told him that her father died a few months before this event, and she had seen him breathing in this same gasping way. Suddenly, she said, she felt sure she, too, was about to die.

She told Dr. Judge, “After 30 minutes or so that evening, the breathing difficulty subsided, and comforted by my mother, I was able to sleep. But at work the next day, the breathing difficulty returned, and again I had this same deep sense of dread and panic. I quickly left work and went to a nearby urgent care center. The doctor there told me I had asthma and allergies. He gave me an inhaler and some allergy medicine.

“That worked for a brief time, and then I had another onset of frightening, gasping breathing, more intense and prolonged than before.” That is when she sought out an expert and came to see Dr. Judge.

SURPRISE RESULTS

Susan was surprised by the results of her time with her new doctor. “He did very thorough allergy and asthma testing,” she reports. “I had allergy testing done on my back and on my arm, plus comprehensive lung function tests. After all of that, he told me that I was allergic to absolutely nothing, and that my lungs were in excellent condition.”

The health issue, it turned out, related to stress. Dr. Judge explored many aspects of this young woman’s life, including her response to her father’s death, other stressful events she revealed, and her difficulty sleeping. He concluded that Susan was having panic attacks based on anxiety, which manifested as something looking a whole lot like asthma.

THE NEED TO BREATHE

“There are few things in life as frightening as the sense that we are losing, or have lost, our ability to breathe freely and openly,” says Dr.

Judge. “That’s why asthma is a problem for so many people. It is a reversible, treatable disease of the airways of the lungs, characterized by difficulty in breathing. Common signs of asthma are obstruction in the airway of the lungs, an increased sensitivity of the airways to a variety of stimuli or triggers—cigarette smoke, for example—and chronic mucus production.

“And while we now have the knowledge and tools to manage asthma very well, it is nonetheless a serious problem for millions of people. Estimates are that 24 million people in this country—a third of them under the age of 18—have asthma. There are still 5,000 asthma-related deaths each year, and the asthma mortality rate is, sad to say, on the increase, especially among African-Americans.”

He notes that “Susan’s case, while not directly related to asthma, is a reminder of the strong relationship between stress and asthma. That is especially clear among children with asthma. A divorce, for example, or other kinds of stressful events can trigger severe onset of asthma attacks in a child with asthma. The best evidence is that the chemicals—the neurotransmitters—that are released during times of stress constrict the air passages in the lungs, thus triggering an onset of asthma. People with asthma are often advised to practice stress-reduction techniques such as meditation.

“The majority of people can control their asthma to the point that it doesn’t compromise their lifestyles—but that control will vary depending on the severity of the asthma. For example, with mild cases of asthma—with occasional wheezing, and symptoms that disappear quickly with the use of a bronchodilator—most problems can be prevented simply by avoiding triggers and using medication on an as-needed basis.

“Moderate asthma can usually be controlled with daily preventive medications combined with a short- and/or long-acting bronchodilator. A person with severe asthma may take regular daily medication and still experience some daily symptoms.”

Dr. Judge, board-certified both as a pediatrician and an allergist-immunologist, encourages people who have difficulty breathing to see a specialist. “Many people believe they have occasional bouts of bronchitis, for example, when in fact with testing they would discover that they have asthma. They would be doing themselves and their families a great favor if they would gain information about this health problem, and learn to control it effectively. Our goal with every allergy and asthma patient is to use the tools and knowledge we have to help them achieve and maintain a good quality of life. Because there is not much question,” he says with a hint of a smile, “that there is a very direct relationship between the quality of our lives and the quality of our breathing.”

For more information about diagnostic and treatment options for allergies, asthma, and sinus conditions, contact:

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