

Depression and Asthma

A Difficult Combination



With a new patient, Dr. Judge talks about the benefits of good diet, exercise, and meditation for patients with asthma or other allergic conditions.

Mood swings and depression are key health concerns for patients with asthma and other allergies, says Dr. Dave Judge of the Allergy, Asthma and Sinus Center in Cary, with offices, as well, in North Raleigh and Wake Forest.

“Of course asthma and depression are two very different conditions affecting different parts of the body, but they are often linked in important ways,” he explains. “The key issue is compliance. When people are depressed, or when they are having anxiety or panic attacks, they are far less likely to take their asthma and allergy medications as prescribed. Thus their respiratory and other problems may worsen, which in turn often triggers more severe depression. Sometimes it’s an action-reaction sequence that spirals out of control.”

Thus, it is not unusual for Dr. Judge, board-certified both as an allergist-immunologist and a pediatrician, to find himself on occasion prescribing mood-altering drugs for some of his patients, and offering counseling on the benefits of a good diet and daily exercise.

“All of this goes together,” he says. “When a patient is feeling depressed, they stop exercising, and usually their diet is poor—either they eat too much or too little, or the wrong

kinds of food. Depressed patients also often don’t have the will and the energy to exercise. Their attitude may be that they simply don’t care if they get well or not.

“So it’s often necessary to prescribe appropriate anti-depressant medications for patients to help them engage in healthier practices, in terms of diet and exercise and especially to increase compliance in taking their asthma and allergy medications. The patient with asthma who has the attitude that they are going to control the condition, rather than let the condition control their life, is on the path to a very positive outcome. Many world-class athletes with asthma have exactly that point of view. But the patient who is fighting the consequences of both asthma and depression is engaged in a tougher battle. Still, we have much we can offer in the way of treatment and support.”

THE MIND-HEALTH CONNECTION

Dr. Judge is witness to the mind-health connection with many of his patients. “There is, on the one hand, a commonly held myth that allergies are to a large extent psychosomatic. I see evidence every day that allergies are very real—and in some instances, life threatening conditions related to heredity and the environment.

“Still, as others have pointed out, it’s true that emotional stress can precipitate allergic reactions, and relaxation techniques can moderate these same reactions. Generally, in my work it seems that allergic reactions very often reflect the mind-body connection.

“A patient came here recently in a state of severe distress from her asthma. She also suffers from depression, and her compliance with taking her asthma medications is poor. She spent three hours here, and took medications with the nebulizer to improve her condition. But medications were having little effect because she was so emotionally upset. When she was crying her wheezing got louder and stronger. I finally convinced her that she needed to calm herself, to come to some place of quietness and peace, before the medications would work for her. Eventually, she did that, and began to respond well to the medications. It was important to engage her mind in the treatment process.” *llh*

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’TIS THE SEASON FOR SNEEZIN’

Noticed the growing collection of pollen on the windshield of your car in recent months? Suddenly experiencing the need to sneeze a lot, often in rapid succession? Bothered by itching of the nose, eyes, throat, or roof of your mouth? Answer these questions in the affirmative, and chances are excellent that you have allergic rhinitis, Dr. Judge points out.

“Of course we are now in the season, extending through the summer and into the fall, when many people have allergic sensitivity to pollens from trees, grasses or weeds, or to airborne mold spores,” he explains.

“When a sensitive person inhales an allergy-causing substance such as ragweed pollen, the body’s immune system reacts abnormally with the allergen—and the chain-reaction results are the familiar symptoms of runny noses, watery eyes, itching, swelling, and other unpleasant conditions. Complications of allergic rhinitis can include ear infections, sinusitis, recurrent sore throats, cough, headache, fatigue, irritability, altered sleep patterns, and poor school performance.”

Allergy treatment can eliminate or alleviate most of these problems, he says. “Avoidance, medication, and immunotherapy (allergy shots) are the main treatment options for allergic rhinitis. Avoidance of the trigger of the allergic reaction is key.” He advises those who react to pollen to keep their windows closed and use air-conditioning during the next six months. Using a high quality air filter is also an excellent idea.

When avoidance doesn’t do the job, there are medications that may help. “Anti-histamines and decongestants are most commonly used for allergic rhinitis,” he says. “And there are newer medications that inhibit the release of chemicals that cause allergic reactions.

“Finally, allergen immunotherapy may be appropriate for patients who don’t respond well to medications or who have unavoidable allergen exposure, perhaps in their workplace. Immunotherapy does not cure allergies, but it can be very effective in controlling allergic symptoms.

“Increasingly, people are coming to understand that there are excellent treatment options for allergic rhinitis, and they need not suffer stoically for months of each year.”

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

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