Is There a Connection Between Allergies and Asthma?

by LANA BARHUM

What's the Link Between Allergies and Asthma?

You may think that allergies and asthma are the same thing; sure, they both cause similar symptoms like coughing and shortness of breath, but they are quite different. While allergies are rarely more than just a nuisance we have to deal with, asthma is a serious condition requiring regular treatment.

What you may not know is allergies may, with time, trigger asthma symptoms.

Allergies

Allergies are your body's way of fighting off what it considers unwelcome matter entering your body. These immune system responses can be mild, such runny nose and coughing, to a serious life-threatening reaction that requires an injection of epinephrine, commonly known as an EpiPen.

You can be allergic to any number of things, including pollen, mold, animal dander, bug bites/strings, food and medications. And allergy symptoms — sneezing, coughing, runny nose, watery eyes — are a result of your immune system releases histamines in response to allergens.

Allergies are a very common chronic medical condition, affecting 30% of adults and 40% of children in the U.S., this according to the Asthma and Allergy Foundation of America.

They affect people of all ages, races and genders, but people with a family history are at higher risk for developing allergies, including hay fever, hives, eczema and food allergies.

Asthma vs. Allergic Asthma

Asthma is a chronic health condition where the airways of the lungs are always inflamed. As many as 26 million people in the U.S. are affected by asthma symptoms — over 8% of the population.

An asthma attack occurs when something triggers symptoms; triggers can include anything from outdoor and indoor allergens, certain foods and medicines, smoke, strong odors, illness (including colds and the flu), exercise, weather and stress.

Once an asthma attack occurs, it makes it difficult for you to breathe and you may start coughing, wheezing, and having shortness of breath and chest tightness.

For some people, asthma is a minor inconvenience, but for others, it can be life-threatening. And while there is no cure for asthma, your symptoms can be controlled.

If you have allergic asthma, your breathing issues are generally triggered by inhaling something you are allergic

to, such as pet dander, mold or tree pollen. Other irritants, such as cold weather and secondhand smoke, can also exacerbate symptoms of allergic asthma as well.

According to the Asthma and Allergy Foundation of America, 60% of people with asthma have allergic asthma, which causes the same symptoms of non-allergic asthma.

Only your doctor can confirm if you have allergic asthma. Testing involves skin and blood tests to determine if, and what type of, allergens trigger your asthma symptoms.

Are Allergies to Blame for Asthma Symptoms?

While allergies and asthma are related conditions, the simple answer as to whether allergies cause asthma is "no." People who have ongoing allergies — especially those that cause eye and nose symptoms — are more likely to develop allergic asthma.

Not everyone who has allergies has asthma and not all asthma is related to allergens. But allergens and certain irritants are triggers for asthma symptoms.

Inhaled allergens are often to blame for allergic asthma. Common inhaled allergens include animal dander, mold, dust mites, and pollen.

Researchers believe that allergic asthma is related to genetic disposition — if one of your parents has allergies and/or asthma, it is possible you may have them, too. Exposure to environmental triggers is also to blame.

Managing Allergic Asthma

You probably have more than one trigger when it comes to your allergic asthma. It is a good idea to learn what your asthma triggers are so you can avoid them, if possible.

You should also work with your doctor to get both your allergies and asthma under control. Long-term medications and short-term relief medicines will help to your keep symptoms managed.