

ABC OF ALLERGOLOGY

ALLERGY MYTHS

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There is a very prevalent myth here in the Western Cape that the inhalers used to relieve and prevent asthma 'harm the heart'. As a result one often has very low levels of compliance with medication use and a great preference for oral treatment.

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Allergists in clinical practice often spend considerable time counselling patients about nonsensical myths. In this article we debunk some of the worst misconceptions and allergy myths.

Short-haired dogs do not cause allergies

All dogs can cause allergies, it is the skin flakes (dander) and saliva that cause allergies and not the hair. Short-haired female dogs do however tend to shed less dander.



Goat's milk is a good substitute for patients with cow's milk allergy

Goat's milk has many similar casein proteins to cow's milk, so can also trigger a reaction and is only tolerated in about 40% of cow's milk allergic children.

Iodine-allergic individuals should avoid all fish and shellfish

Fish do not contain significant amounts of iodine and will not cause problems in iodine-allergic people.

Adrenaline injectors are dangerous and may damage your heart

Adrenaline (epinephrine) auto-injectors are life-saving in people with severe allergies to foods or insect stings. They are safe to inject into the muscle of the thigh as soon as possible in a severe allergic reaction. If administered by mistake, you may feel slightly agitated and your heart will race, but the effect will wear off.

Your allergic reaction will get worse with each subsequent exposure

There is no predicting how you might react subsequently, a reaction may be exactly the same, it may be more severe or it may be less severe.

It is fine to give 'a little bit' of egg or cow's milk occasionally to build up tolerance

This is not true and dangerous advice in highly egg or milk allergic children.



If you are allergic to egg white you can eat the egg yolk

This is a dangerous practice, as there will be albumen proteins attached to the yolk.

Children will outgrow their allergies

Some children will outgrow their allergies, but the majority will retain their allergies especially allergies to foods such as nuts and fish. At least 50% of allergies to pets, pollen and dust mites also persist into adult life.

Allergies are all in the mind

Allergies are potentially life-threatening reactions to common environmental substances and foods which result in allergic inflammation. Emotions can exacerbate symptoms, but are never the main cause.

Multiple food allergies are common

Fortunately food allergies are usually limited. Up to four food types are usual with some cross-reactions to unrelated food families. For example, latex allergy sufferers may react with oral allergies to kiwi, avocado, banana and chestnut.

Allergy testing is a waste of time because a person will probably react to everything

Allergy testing is accurate and testing should be done after carefully discussing the person's symptoms and medical history. Most allergic people will react to a few allergens which once identified can then be avoided.

Allergy testing is dangerous and should not be performed in young children

Occasionally skin testing for allergies can trigger a slight skin reaction or wheezing, but this is very rare. Blood RAST testing for allergies is safer in highly allergic people. Children can and should be allergy tested from 4 months of age if an allergy is suspected.

Desensitisation to allergies is hocus-pocus

Injection (SIT) or sublingual (SLIT) desensitisation immunotherapy is highly effective and the only way of curing allergies to grass pollen, house-dust mites and insect venom. Remember that EPD (enzyme potentiated desensitisation) is not effective.

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Indoor house plants and flowers cause allergic rhinitis

Allergic rhinitis is usually triggered by grass and tree pollen and occasionally by flowers of the daisy family. Dull wind-pollinated plants and grasses cause more allergies than brightly coloured insect-pollinated flowers.

Building dust causes allergic rhinitis

It is the powdered faecal pellets of house-dust mites that cause allergies and not the dust particles or sand grains.

If you have allergies you are better off living in a desert or dry climate

Allergy-provoking plants such as grasses, weeds, olive and mesquite trees thrive in dry semi-desert environments and allergies may actually be worse.

Intentionally exposing yourself to pets can cure allergies

If allergic to pets, your allergies will be provoked by each exposure and this will make matters worse.

Milk and wheat allergies are common in adults

Cow's milk allergy occurs in some children but is usually outgrown by age 5 years; wheat allergy starting in adulthood is very rare.

People with sinus and ear problems should avoid milk

Sinus problems and chest problems are not provoked by cow's milk allergy. Watery postnasal mucus often feels perceptibly thicker when mixed with cow's milk during meals and therefore increases awareness of the mucus.

Food-allergic people usually react to strawberries and tomato

The common food allergies in children are cow's milk, wheat, egg, fish and peanuts, while adults react to fish, shellfish, peanuts and nuts.

Food allergies cause hyperactivity

Food allergies cannot trigger hyperactivity. Children with ADDH (hyperactivity) may become more active ('sugar surge') after consuming artificially coloured sweets and junk foods, but this is not an allergy.



Asthma inhalers can make your allergies worse and you should rather use breathing exercises (Buteyko)

Asthma is due to inflamed airways. Breathing exercises will not clear this inflammation; only low-dose steroid inhalers can do this and control the asthma.

Antihistamines will lose their effect if taken continuously and will then be ineffective if you have a severe allergic reaction

Antihistamines can safely be taken for prolonged periods and do not become less effective.

Steroid creams are dangerous, causing skin thinning in eczema and should not be applied to children's skin

Steroid creams are the only effective treatment for clearing eczema and will have no adverse effect if used for short periods of up to a week at a time. Once cleared of eczema, the skin should be continuously protected with a moisturising ointment.

I am sure there must be 100s more!

This is all anecdotal and therefore there are no references available.

Declaration of conflict of interest

Dr Morris declares no conflict of interest.