

Allergy – a modern epidemic

Have you got red eyes, a runny nose and you can't stop sneezing? Well, you're probably suffering from hay fever. Allergies are not a new phenomenon. There is evidence that as long ago as 2,641 BC a pharaoh died from an allergic reaction to a wasp sting, but thanks to the development of remedies such as antihistamines, wasp stings are no longer likely to be fatal. However, the number of allergies has increased dramatically since the 1950s.

The leading theory for this increase is the hygiene hypothesis. When standards of living improve, the exposure to infections decreases. This may cause the immune system to recognise harmless things such as peanuts as potentially dangerous, setting off an allergic reaction. The exposure to nature and animals of more 'traditional' lifestyles seems to provide some protection against allergies. For example, with migrants from Asia, the older the children are when they arrive in the UK, the fewer allergies they have.

Another possible reason for the increase could be the mis-identification of allergies. For example, one study in the UK showed that although a third of parents believed their children had some kind of allergic reaction to food, only five per cent of the children studied actually did. Also surveys of adults in the UK show 20 per cent believe they have a food intolerance, when only five per cent actually do.

The two main approaches to treating allergies are avoidance or desensitisation. Sensitivity to peanuts is one of the fastest-growing food allergies worldwide. In many western countries parents avoid giving children peanuts, but in the Middle East and parts of Africa where children have peanuts from an early age the incidence of peanut allergies is much lower. Desensitisation is commonly used for some allergies and researchers are now investigating whether it might work for peanut allergies.

Both outdoor and indoor pollution are recognised as linked to the rise in allergies, but there is some good news on the horizon with the innovation of an air-cleaning wallpaper. The material is made to resemble the structure of the lungs and actually absorbs the pollution, with the possibility of developing this material in the future for shoes, clothing and furniture.

Allergies are still one of the most puzzling areas of medicine, but improvements in the training of doctors and research which is currently being carried out should mean that one day there may be effective treatments for many of the allergies people suffer from today.

1 Before reading the text, think about the causes of and treatments for allergies. Now read the text. How many of your ideas are talked about in the text?

2 Which paragraph in the text (1–6) talks about the following?

- | | |
|---|-----------------|
| 1 the main ways of dealing with allergies | paragraph _____ |
| 2 wrong identification of allergies | paragraph _____ |
| 3 why there's hope for the future | paragraph _____ |
| 4 allergies aren't something new | paragraph _____ |
| 5 the main theory for the increase in allergies | paragraph _____ |
| 6 a new material for reducing pollution | paragraph _____ |

3 Read the article and decide if the sentences are true (T) or false (F). Circle the correct statements and correct those that are false.

- | | |
|--|-----|
| 1 Wasp stings nowadays are never fatal. | T/F |
| 2 One possible reason for the increase in allergies is higher standards of living. | T/F |
| 3 Children have fewer allergies than they think they do. | T/F |
| 4 Desensitisation is currently an effective treatment for peanut allergies. | T/F |
| 5 Pollution is one of the causes of the increase in the number of allergies. | T/F |
| 6 You can buy furniture today made of a material that can absorb pollution. | T/F |

4 The table below contains verbs and nouns from the text. Complete the missing forms, using a dictionary if necessary.

verb	noun		verb	noun
	reaction		believe	
	development		treat	
improve				avoidance
	exposure		investigate	
	protection		pollute	

5 Now complete the sentences below using some of the words from the table above.

- If you _____ children to nature and animals, they are less likely to have allergies.
- There is currently _____ into whether desensitisation is effective for peanut allergies.
- The _____ in treatments for allergies means fewer people have to suffer the effects.
- If you _____ badly to wasp stings, you should use an antihistamine.
- One of the approaches to allergic reactions to peanuts is _____ of the peanuts.
- One _____ for allergies is desensitisation.
- It is a widely-held _____ in many western countries that it's better for children to avoid eating peanuts.

6 We use *the ..., the ...* to say that one thing depends on another thing. For example, in the text *the older the children are when they arrive in the UK, the fewer allergies they have* means when children are older when they arrive in the UK, they have fewer allergies. Rewrite the sentences below using *the ..., the ...*

- When migrant children are younger when they come to the UK, they have more allergies.
 - When pollution is higher, people get more allergies.
 - When people have a higher standard of living, they have more allergies.
 - When people use antihistamines earlier, they are less likely to have a fatal reaction.
 - When you are exposed to more pollution, you are more likely to have an allergy.
- 7 Discuss these questions with your partner(s).
- Which allergies are common or on the increase in your country?
 - What treatments are available, either medical or more traditional?
 - The increase in people's standard of living can lead to more allergies, but what are the benefits in an improved standard of living?
 - Do you think people will be interested in having wallpaper, shoes, clothing or furniture made of a material that can absorb pollution? Why / Why not?

Glossary

- epidemic** (*noun*) – a sudden increase in something bad or unpleasant that affects many people
- phenomenon** (*noun*) – an event or situation that can be seen to happen or exist
- wasp** (*noun*) – a black and yellow flying insect that can sting you, but doesn't make honey
- antihistamine** (*noun*) – a drug used to treat an allergy
- fatal** (*adj*) – causing someone to die
- hypothesis** (*noun*) – a suggested explanation that has not yet been tested or proved to be correct
- immune system** (*noun*) – the system in your body that protects you against diseases
- intolerance** (*noun*) – if someone has an intolerance to a particular food or drink, they cannot eat it or drink it because it makes them ill
- desensitisation** (*noun*) – stimulation of the immune system by gradually increasing doses of the substances a person is allergic to
- incidence** (*noun*) – the number of cases of an illness or a medical condition in a particular situation
- innovation** (*noun*) – a new idea, method, piece of equipment etc
- absorb** (*verb*) – to take in a gas, liquid, or other substance