

Allergy sufferers can lead normal lives with proper treatment

By Hasnita A Majid, Channel NewsAsia



SINGAPORE : For some, an allergy might not be as simple as a runny nose or an annoying itch; it could become a matter of life and death.

For one new mother, her baby was born sneezing, not crying.

One-and-a-half year old Ashton Chong not only inherited some of his mother's features but also her allergies.

He has eczema and asthma, and is also allergic to certain types of food, such as eggs.

His father Samuel Chong said, "The first clue we had that he might have allergies that might worsen is the moment he was born because he started sneezing. It wasn't anything that we were alarmed with because we thought that it was just something in the air; but it happened all the time, almost every day or every other day.

"Then he also started to develop rashes fairly soon after birth, especially on the cheeks and also some parts of the body. And I can't remember when but he started having a nasal discharge and always having a chronic cold."

Ashton then developed a throaty cough that grew persistent and was referred to the experts.

Since then, medication and knowing how to manage his allergies have helped improve his condition.

But it also involved a change in lifestyle.

Ashton's mother Caroline Lee said, "I would have to make sure that the air, the environment is clean because dustmites are one of the allergens and the mattress cover needs to be boiled."

Knowledge about her son's allergies, she says, is the best weapon to combat his condition, a privilege neither she nor her family had when she was a child.

Said Ms Lee, "We had to go through a lot of discomfort. I had a perpetual blocked nose and lots and lots of eczema and sneezing all the time and getting bad headaches because of sinus blockage. Now at least the allergies can be controlled compared to when I was his age. I guess he can enjoy a fairly normal life."

Ashton has some of the most common allergy diseases in children, which include sensitive nose and eyes.

But some children do outgrow them.

"All diseases tend to be lifelong and there's actually no cure for these diseases, but with the appropriate treatment and continual management they can outgrow these symptoms very well. It is important to treat them, so rightfully there's no cure but the children can live a good quality of life with unrestricted lifestyle," said Associate Professor Daniel Goh, The Children's Medical Institute, National University Hospital.

At NUH, a programme called "I CAN" aims to help children like Ashton lead healthy, normal lives by educating their parents on how to manage their allergies.

"We recognise that the treatment of allergy and asthma in children is multi-faceted. We need to look into different aspects, not only diagnosis, close monitoring to help and enable the family to lead a normal healthy lifestyle," Prof Goh said.

He said that although improper management of asthma can lead to death, the numbers are very few and far between.

In 2003, only one child below 15 years old died as a result from asthma, while there were four deaths in 2002.

Studies show that the number of children with allergies is growing.

"A cleaner environment is thought to be the cause of the increasing trend of allergies worldwide. This is the hygiene hypothesis, which is the widely accepted explanation where a child is in a cleaner environment, you are less exposed to the germs and toxins in the environment and your immune system gets geared towards the allergies," said Dr Liew Woei Kang, registrar, Paediatric Medicine, KK Women's and Children's Hospital.

Doctors also caution against over protecting the child, such as preventing him from taking part in exercises.

Dr Liew said, "Prevention can be divided into maintenance and different kind of flares, and identification of avoidance of triggers must be looked at in the right context. In skin allergy, in about one third of cases we know that food allergy plays a part and is a trigger for skin rashes ... we can reduce the incidence of skin allergy.

"In asthma, exercise has been known to trigger a presentation of poorly controlled diseases, so avoiding exercise is not the way to go but you should talk to your doctor so that you can resume the exercise again."

If you are wondering whether you are allergic to some food or different allergens in the environment, you can take a skin prick test.

Within half an hour of starting this procedure, you will know exactly what will set you off swelling, wheezing or sneezing.

While childhood allergies can be detected early, some people develop allergies later in life, which can also be triggered by medication, food and the environment.

For example, doctors say an allergic reaction to medication such as antibiotics can be due to the immune system becoming sensitised to the drug.

The Drug and Poison Information Centre at the Singapore General Hospital offers information on both adverse drug reactions that can trigger an allergy attack, as well as poisons.

Said Dr R Ponampalam, director of the centre, "There's a wide spectrum of reaction that patients can present in, from a mild irritation, hives which are red, elevated patches on the skin, and puffy eyes; and they can also have rhinitis, which is running nose and sneezing. These are mild symptoms. But the more severe symptoms involve the obstruction of airways to difficulty in breathing similar to asthma attack and in the worst case scenario the patient actually collapse because his blood pressure crashes."

Dr Palam says while death due to an allergic reaction is rare, it does happen, such as in the case of a man who collapse after being stung by bees.

Out of a 100 calls the centre gets every week, about seven are related to an adverse drug reaction, including allergic reactions.

You can reach the 24-hour centre at 6423 9119. - CNA