

Something's in the Air . . . It's Spring! Gesundheit!

By Jennifer Wake



It's pollen time at the Lafayette Reservoir

Photo Jennifer Wake

Spring is one of the most beautiful seasons, as blossoms bloom on tree branches and wild mustard grows on hillsides. For the thousands of Lamorinda allergy sufferers, however, the beauty can bring a sense of foreboding.

According to the American Academy of Allergy, Asthma, and Immunology, allergies affect more than 50 million people in the United States, at an estimated cost of \$7.9 billion per year, and more than half of all U.S. citizens testing positive to one or more allergens.

"In the past 20 years, there has been a 30 percent increase in people with allergies – especially among children," said Dr. Allyson Tevrizian, who is an allergist/immunologist for Allergy and Asthma Medical Group of the Bay Area.

The cause for the increase is yet to be determined, but there are a variety of hypotheses. One such hypothesis states that living in a pristine environment with minimal outdoor activity may increase the risk of developing allergies.

"The leading hypothesis is the hygiene hypothesis," Dr. Tevrizian said. "The basic premise is that the absence of infectious exposure at a critical point in immune system development increases allergic disease. With increased use of antibiotics, smaller family sizes, and decreasing exposure to farm animals in rural settings, children may not be getting the necessary immune stimulation that directs them away from allergic disease."

Diana Pandell, Ph.D., (an alternative healthcare practitioner in Lafayette) agrees that in our country we are overly concerned with cleanliness and the avoidance of common exposures that actually can help to build our immune systems.

But many questions are not answered because the indoor environment is so complex, explained Tevrizian.

Some studies have shown that if you live in a rural environment with farm animals, your incidence of developing allergies is less than if you live in a more urban environment. A study published in the Journal of the American Medical Association found that children who grow up with two or more dogs in the home have their risk of developing pet allergies reduced by as much as 50 percent or more. But the results only applied to infants during their first year of life when their immune systems were still developing.

The most significant finding was that pet exposure early in life not only appeared to protect against pet allergies, but dust mite, ragweed, grass and other allergies as well.

"Some of the most intriguing studies come from rural locations," Tevrizian said. "If you grow up on a farm where there is a covered walkway between your home and the barn so that presumably you are inhaling animal feces, you have a very low incidence of allergies and asthma. There is research studying the part of the bacteria responsible for the immune system switch as a potential treatment for those at high risk of allergic disease."

Until then, most allergy sufferers continue to find relief through allergy shots, over-the-counter remedies, or by strict avoidance behavior.

Avoiding pollen can be tricky, however, if you live near Acacia trees, which shed yellow pollen, said Gary Dorrington of McDonnell Nursery in Orinda. "Acacias grow wild in the area, so there's not much you can do about that," he said. "Also, a lot of people use Waxleaf Privet as a hedge, which can be really hard for people with allergies. If you use it as a hedge and it isn't allowed to flower, it's not a problem. The best thing you can do is check the pollen count before going outside."

Those who feel they have tried everything may seek unconventional treatments.

Pandell works with allergy sufferers using NAET and other modalities, which blend energy balancing, testing, and treatment procedures from Chinese medicine and nutritional disciplines.

"I was born with severe allergies which worsened after I moved to California," she said. "I had allergies to foods, mold, dust, animals, and pollen. Despite trying many different methods, including allergy shots, prescription drugs, and elimination diets, I still suffered on a daily basis." Pandell says her allergies have been eliminated or substantially decreased due to NAET. She has worked with hundreds of allergy sufferers to help them reprogram their bodies and desensitize their allergies.

Conventional means of therapy are also based on this premise. "Allergy shots are trying to do something natural as well," explained Dr. Tevrizian. "We are giving the thing they are allergic to in low doses, and then slowly increase the dosage to desensitize them to what they are allergic to."

A new treatment called sublingual allergen immunotherapy – or allergy drops – may eliminate the need for shots and weekly doctor's visits for some. The drops are placed under the tongue and can be administered at home.

"This method is still considered off label use and may not be as effective as shots because you cannot reach as high allergen doses," Tevrizian said.

For now, until more breakthroughs are discovered, Lamorindans will continue to battle dust mites, mold, pollen, diesel exhaust particles, and tobacco smoke as they continue to greet sneezing, wheezing, and coughing with empathy and a hearty "Gesundheit!"