

health_report

PFIZER AUSTRALIA

professional health care information

www.healthreport.com.au

ISSUE

41

LOOKING AT

ALLERGIES

LATEST
RESEARCH
FINDINGS

- What is an allergy?
- Prevention and Treatment
- Common Myths

Pfizer
AUSTRALIA

ascia
australian society of clinical immunology and allergy inc.

ascia

australasian society of clinical immunology and allergy inc.



AUSTRALIA

This edition of the Pfizer Australia Health Report has been produced in partnership with ASCIA.

The Pfizer Australia Health Report is always available free from www.healthreport.com.au. You can also request additional copies by calling **1800 675 229**.

The Pfizer Australia Health Report is produced in partnership with health consumer organisations and medical experts, and provides information and news to help you and your family to live a healthier, happier lifestyle.

Severe allergic reactions –

failure to have an emergency action plan putting lives at risk

Welcome to the latest Pfizer Australia Health Report. In this edition we look at how some Australians who suffer allergic reactions may be putting themselves at risk by not having an emergency action plan.

The new research raises concerns about lack of education, access to specialist care, and complacency among people who are at risk by not having an emergency action plan.

The findings also reveal that 44 percent of Australians report some form of allergy, and 51 percent of this group experience moderate or severe symptoms. Of the seven percent who experience severe reactions (anaphylaxis), fewer than half carry emergency medication with them or have an anaphylaxis action plan, which provides instruction on how to treat anaphylaxis.

According to Associate Professor Dominic Mallon, President of the Australasian Society of Clinical Immunology & Allergy (ASCIA), these findings are concerning because they suggest that those with severe allergies may not be taking the precautions necessary to safeguard their health in an emergency situation.

“Anaphylaxis can be life threatening and it is important for people who are at risk of anaphylaxis to have the correct medication on hand and know how to use it. If they have concerns about how best to do this, they should consult their specialist,” Associate Professor Mallon explained.

The research also revealed the extent to which allergic conditions can affect the lives of sufferers with significant impacts being felt on the quality of life and work productivity. One in three (34 percent) respondents reported that their quality of life is affected by their allergy and one in four reported that it affects their sleeping patterns and causes tiredness during the day. In addition, one in four said that they can sometimes feel down as a result of their allergy.

The impact of allergies also extends into the workplace with 52 percent of sufferers experiencing their symptoms at work and 76 percent of those reporting that their ability to do their job effectively is reduced as a result.

“If your allergy is aggravated by being in a certain environment, such as your workplace, you should consult your doctor or specialist who can help identify what your allergies are and prescribe appropriate treatments to help reduce and manage your symptoms,” Associate Professor Mallon advised.

Despite the large number of people reporting allergic symptoms, only half of these (one in five of all Australians) have had an allergy test in their life time to determine what is causing their symptoms.

75 percent of Australians with allergies have received treatment or diagnosis from their doctor and 37 percent have also consulted a pharmacist about their symptoms.

“Most allergies can be easily managed and it’s encouraging to learn that Australians are consulting their local health care professionals about what treatment is best for them. It’s equally important however that the advice they receive reflects best practice and that people heed the advice



they are given to ensure they effectively manage their symptoms,” added Associate Professor Mallon.

“The majority of symptoms are treated with over-the-counter antihistamines, which are effective but do not address the underlying cause. Only one percent of people surveyed received desensitisation for their allergies which, for the most common allergies, is the only treatment that specifically treats the underlying problem,” noted Associate Professor Mallon.

The independent survey was conducted by Stollznow Research in December 2007 and was based on responses from 1,562 Australians.

The Australasian Society of Clinical Immunology and Allergy (www.allergy.org.au) has collaborated with Pfizer Australia to assist with raising awareness of the effective identification and treatment of allergic diseases through this edition of the Pfizer Australia Health Report.

what is an allergy?



Allergies are very common and increasing in Australia and New Zealand, affecting around one in three people at some point in their lives. There are many different causes of allergies, and symptoms vary from mild to potentially life threatening. Allergies are also one of the major factors associated with the cause and persistence of asthma. Fortunately, with most allergies, there are effective prevention and treatment options available.

Allergy occurs when a person's immune system reacts to substances in the environment that do not seem to affect other people. These substances are known as allergens and are found in house dust mites, pets, pollen, moulds and foods.

At the same time, 'atopy' is the genetic tendency to develop allergic diseases. People with atopy are said to be 'atopic'. When atopic people are exposed to allergens, they can develop an immune reaction that leads to allergic inflammation (such as redness and swelling). This can then cause symptoms in the:

- nose and/or eyes – hay fever (allergic rhinitis/conjunctivitis)
- skin – eczema, hives
- lungs – asthma
- whole body – anaphylaxis

However, a substance that is an allergen for one person may not be for another – everyone reacts differently. The likelihood (or risk) of developing allergies is increased if other family members suffer from allergy or asthma.

“

When a person who is allergic to a particular allergen comes into contact with it, an allergic reaction occurs.

What happens when you have an allergic reaction?

When a person who is allergic to a particular allergen comes into contact with it, an allergic reaction occurs.

This begins when an allergen such as pollen enters the body, triggering an antibody response. The antibodies attach themselves to special cells called 'mast cells'. When the pollen comes into contact with the antibodies, the mast cells respond by releasing certain substances, one of which is called 'histamine'.

When the release of histamine is due to an allergen, the resulting swelling and inflammation is extremely irritating and uncomfortable. For instance, if you are allergic to cats and you enter a house inhabited by a cat, you will immediately experience hay fever symptoms, all of which may be caused by histamine and other substances released during an allergic response.

According to the findings published in the Pfizer Australia Health Report, the main type of allergy or adverse reaction experienced is 'pollen allergy' (52%). Around one in four people experience the following allergies:

- medication allergy – however, more women (31%) than men (17%) experience reactions to medication
- house dust mite allergy
- asthma triggered by allergy – with two-thirds of those in this group knowing what triggers their allergy.

Around one in five experience:

- animal allergy
- food allergy
- insect allergy

Just over one in six (16%) have a 'food intolerance' while one in ten indicate they have a 'mould allergy'. Close to one in five (18%) indicate they have another allergy or adverse reaction.

'Pollen' and 'medication' allergies combined account for close to one in two of those with 'one' allergy:

- pollen allergy (29%)
- medication allergy (17%).

Symptoms, severity & duration

The Pfizer Australia Health Report findings also demonstrate that 'watery, itchy and red eyes' are the most common (55%) symptoms affecting the sample group.

Other symptoms include frequent blocked nose (46%); feeling of pressure of sinuses (37%); disturbed sleep, daytime tiredness (29%); frequent throat clearing cough (28%); loss of sense of smell (20%); frequent sore throats and hoarse voice (20%), and; frequent unexplained headaches (20%). Other common symptoms include mouth breathing, bad breath and frequent middle ear infections.

One in five of those with an allergy have experienced all these symptoms, except frequent middle ear infections, while a group of close to one in four (23%) indicate they have experienced none of these symptoms. This is the case for close to one in two (46%) of those with 'one' allergy.

A greater number of those with 'more than one' allergy (compared to one allergy) have experienced all symptoms, except 'frequent middle ear infections'. More of those surveyed who feel that their allergies have shaped their quality of life have experienced all symptoms.

What is causing your allergies?

The first step in managing allergies is the identification of the cause(s) of the problem. This begins when an allergen such as pollen enters the body, triggering an antibody response. The antibodies attach themselves to special cells called 'mast cells'. When the pollen comes into contact with the antibodies, the mast cells respond by releasing certain substances, one of which is called 'histamine'.



In some cases, the cause(s) may be obvious. However, in other cases it may require medical evaluation using proven investigational tools. Once the cause(s) is identified, steps can be taken to limit exposure to the allergen(s).

Keeping a record of symptoms is important

Diagnosing an allergy can be a difficult process, requiring considerable medical expertise, since the symptoms may often be similar to other conditions. For instance, a recurrent cold with symptoms such as a runny nose might in fact be allergic rhinitis. Allergies may be responsible for other conditions such as asthma, upset stomach and skin rashes.

If you think you may have an allergy but are not sure of the cause, you should start to keep a record of your symptoms. This will help you find out what you may be allergic to. Once you have determined this, you can then take steps to limit your exposure to the allergen(s). Allergen avoidance information is available from the ASCIA website –

<http://www.allergy.org.au/content/view/187/126/>

It is important to maintain a regular diary noting when symptoms occur. It is also useful to make a note of the general patterns of your symptoms. The following information may be useful for your doctor:

- Do your symptoms occur when you are in the house as well as outside (or vice versa)?
- Do you suffer more at night time or during the day?
- Do you wake up with symptoms in the morning?
- Do you only get symptoms at certain times of the year?
- Does exposure to animals bring on your symptoms?
- Do you think that any food or drink brings on your symptoms?

It is important to seek medical advice

If you think you have an allergy visit your pharmacist or doctor for advice. They will want to know the history of your complaint, so the more information you can provide, the better.

If your allergy intensifies, your doctor may test you to determine the cause or may recommend that you visit an allergy specialist for further investigation and treatment.

Allergy tests

There are different categories of allergy tests and, according to the findings published in the Pfizer Australia Health Report, only one in five have had at least one test in their life.

- Close to three in four (72%) have had a skin prick test which involves putting drops of a variety of suspected allergens (for example: pollen, dust mites, pet dander, mould, foods) on the forearm or back, then lightly pricking the skin through the drop with a needle. Sensitivity to a particular allergen will show itself with an itchy, red, raised wheal.
- Blood tests for allergen specific IgE antibodies (RAST) – determine sensitivity to suspected allergens. Whereas the skin prick test result is available immediately, RAST results are often not available for a few days and may be more expensive than skin prick testing. However, RAST testing is a useful alternative when skin prick testing is not possible.

Quality of life & allergies

People's quality of life is affected by allergies in varying degrees. According to the independent survey conducted for the Pfizer Australia Health Report, just over one in three feel their allergies affect their quality of life. In addition, around one in four of those who have an allergy say their lifestyle has been affected in these ways:

- I need to avoid certain environments
- it sometimes makes me feel down
- it affects my sleeping patterns
- it stops me doing certain activities.

Just over three in four (76%) of those who have an allergy and experience symptoms at work say it reduces their ability to do their job effectively to some degree.

Prevention and Treatment of allergies

Identifying causes which can be avoided is an essential part of treating allergic diseases. Once the causes are correctly identified, then the following practical advice for avoiding or minimising your exposure to allergens should help.

Allergy diagnosis is the first step

According to the ASCIA, it is important to identify and confirm allergens that trigger your symptoms. In some cases, the offending allergen may be obvious. However, in other cases your doctor will need to consider your medical history together with the results of allergy tests (skin prick tests or blood tests). If necessary, you may be referred to an allergy specialist for further detailed assessment.



House dust mite is a common allergen in Australia and New Zealand

The house dust mite is the most common allergen source in humid towns and cities, and there is no easy way to remove it. Regardless of what advertisements may say, there is no vacuum cleaner, dust mite spray or dry cleaning that will completely eliminate the dust mite. Depending on the severity of symptoms, the following advice may help.

Bedding

The first room to tackle is the bedroom and combinations of the following measures are recommended.

- Wash sheets and pillow cases weekly in water hotter than 55°C.
- Cover mattress, pillow and quilt with dust mite resistant covers. Suppliers include Allergend, Allerseach and Mite Guard and some health funds may provide a rebate.
- Remove sheepskin or woollen underlays.
- Remove all soft toys from the bed and bedroom. Replace them with wooden or plastic toys which can be washed.



Other measures

- If possible, consider replacing carpets with hard floors (such as wood, tiles, linoleum, concrete), where practical and affordable.
- Damp dust or use electrostatic cloths to clean hard surfaces (including hard floors) weekly.
- Vacuum carpets weekly, however, vacuuming increases the amount of house dust mite allergen in the air for up to 20 minutes. So, ask someone else to do the vacuuming
- Reduce humidity – have a dry and well ventilated house with adequate floor and wall insulation.
- Windows – venetian blinds or flat blinds are easier to clean than heavy curtains.
- Consider house dust mite avoidance measures when building a new home.

Pets can be a major source of allergens in the home

Pets are a major source of allergens in the home. As allergens are stuck to the hair and skin of pets, the allergens become airborne when the pet sheds their hair. The allergens can remain airborne for some time.

Cat allergen is especially difficult to remove and can remain for months. It can even be found in places where cats never live such as on clothing used for schools and offices.

The most effective method of allergen avoidance is the removal of the pets from the home. It is an emotional decision but the health of the allergy sufferer should be a priority.

Dogs, guinea pigs, mice and rabbits are not as allergenic as cats and can more easily be kept outside. However, they can still cause annoying and occasionally serious problems. Birds may occasionally cause allergic symptoms.

Mould may also be a source of allergens in the home

Mould is commonly found in bathrooms, refrigerators and in places with little air circulation (such as wardrobes), and in bedrooms with ensuite bathrooms. If you are allergic to mould, you may consider:

- removing visible mould by cleaning with bleach or other mould reduction cleaners
- ensuring adequate natural ventilation including the use of extractor fans
- sealing leaks in bathrooms and roofs
- clearing overflowing gutters and blocked under-floor vents
- removing indoor pot plants (which promote mould growth)
- drying or removing wet carpets
- not working with garden compost or mulch.

Pollen can be hard to avoid

The height of the grass pollen season occurs between late September and December, and the major amount of pollen in the air usually occurs between 6.00am and 12pm. Depending on the weather patterns, there may be an increase of pollen in the early hours of the morning. Avoidance of pollen is difficult but the following advice may help:

- Remain indoors (when possible) during pollen seasons, on windy days or after thunderstorms
- Avoid activities known to cause exposure to pollen, such as mowing grass
- Shower after activities where there is high exposure to pollen
- Use re-circulated air in the car when pollen levels are high
- Seek advice about medications or treatments that will relieve your symptoms.



Australia's \$7 Billion Allergy Burden

The cost of allergies to the Australian economy is more than \$7 billion per year, and most Australians face a wait of many months to see a specialist, if they can access care at all.

These are among key findings in a report by Access Economics released recently by the Australasian Society for Clinical Immunology and Allergy (ASCIA).

The report, 'Economic Impact of Allergies' outlines how the financial cost of allergies in 2007 was \$7.8 billion, with lost productivity and health system expenditure the major contributing factors.

The estimated cost to Australian allergy sufferers due to reduced quality of life (the 'burden of disease') is estimated at \$21.5 billion, approximately double the estimated figures for arthritis (\$11.7 billion) and hearing loss (\$11.7 billion).

Not only does Australia have one of the highest incidence of allergic disorders in the developed world, but recent studies have demonstrated a doubling in some conditions such as allergic rhinitis (hay fever) and eczema, and, more recently, potentially dangerous anaphylaxis (mainly due to food allergy) as well. Asthma, hay fever, chronic sinusitis and 'other allergy' comprise 4 of the top 10 most common long-term self-reported illnesses in youth aged 12-24 years in Australia.

ASCIA President Elect, Associate Professor Raymond Mullins said the report is a wake-up call: "We know that allergic disorders are a major health issue for many afflicted people in our community. Now we know the tremendous cost to the economy as well. Yet for the 4.1 million, or 1 in 5 affected, mainly young adults and their children, the report also shows that half the financial burden falls directly on them.

"Most allergy medication is not subsidised by the PBS nor counts towards the Medicare safety net. Our allergy patients spend over \$120 million/year on conventional cross-the-counter allergy medicines, additional amounts on prescription medicines as well as untold amounts on alternative medicines, with often several family members affected. Our patients are short-changed when it comes to equitable access to effective therapies".

Allergic disorders mostly affect children and young adults and have a negative impact on quality of life. In children, these disorders affect sleep, impair learning, memory and behaviour. Children with food allergies are also at significant risk, and the condition means extra stress for their families over issues such as care at school, risk of death and the need for emergency medication in the form of injectable adrenaline. In adults, allergic disorders lead to impaired quality of life, increased absenteeism from work, reduced productivity when they are at work ('presenteeism') and are a significant financial burden.

Common Myths



Myth 1: Allergies are uncommon

Reality: The frequency of allergic disease has approximately doubled in the last 25 years. In Australia and New Zealand, around 1 in 3 people will develop allergies at some time during life.

Myth 2: Allergies are harmless

Reality: Allergies are a serious problem and should not be ignored. Untreated allergies have a significant impact on quality of life.

Myth 3: Flowering plants cause hayfever

Reality: Pollen allergy tends to be due to air borne pollen from wind-pollinated grass, weed and tree species. By contrast, the pollen of flowering plants is large and sticky, does not blow very far, and requires birds and bees for pollination. Therefore, when people complain that scented flowers trouble them, it is usually a chemical irritation from the perfume that makes them sneeze rather than the pollen.

Myth 5: Moving interstate can cure allergies

Reality: Moving away from the source of allergen (such as interstate, or from inland areas to the coast) may temporarily relieve allergies. Unfortunately, allergic people are also prone to developing new allergies, and often symptoms reappear within a few years.

Myth 6: Continuous exposure to animals will desensitise you to them

Reality: If you are allergic to an animal, continuous exposure will not decrease your allergy.

Myth 7: Eliminating wheat and milk helps asthma and hayfever

Reality: Diet plays a minor role in the management of asthma or hayfever.

Myth 10: Colours and preservatives are a common cause of asthma

Reality: Preservatives like sodium metabisulphite in wine, dried fruits, vinegar, grapes and some fruit salads can worsen, but do not cause, asthma.

Myth 11: Alternative tests and treatments are just as effective as conventional tests and medications for allergy and asthma

Reality: There are several unorthodox 'tests' for allergy such as cytotoxic food testing, IgG food testing, Vega testing, kinesiology, iridology, pulse testing, Alcat testing and Rinkel's Intradermal skin testing. These have no scientific basis, are unreliable and have no useful role in the assessment of allergy.

Myth 12: Allergies and asthma can be cured

Reality: There is no cure for asthma or allergies. The closest thing to a cure for allergy is immunotherapy (also known as desensitisation), which is effective for treating some allergies like hayfever, asthma and stinging insect allergy, but currently not for treating food allergies.

For more common myths, visit www.allergy.org.au

Useful Links and Resources

Emergency Medication

People with severe allergies may need an 'anaphylaxis action plan' and to carry emergency medication (injectable adrenalin). Such medication could be the difference between life and death during a major allergic reaction.

The research findings for this Pfizer Australia Health Report suggest that too many people with potentially life-threatening allergies are not carrying this medication, which is effectively putting their lives at risk every day. ASCIA recommends that allergy sufferers find out more by visiting www.allergy.org.au or talking to a healthcare professional as soon as possible.



Useful Websites:

ASCIA	www.allergy.org.au
Anaphylaxis Australia	www.allergyfacts.org.au
Allergy New Zealand	www.allergy.org.nz
Food Standards Australia New Zealand	www.foodstandards.gov.au
National Asthma Council	www.nationalasthma.org.au
Asthma Foundations of Australia	www.asthmaaustralia.org.au



health report PFIZER AUSTRALIA

© 2008 Pfizer Australia Pty Ltd ABN 50 008 422 348.

This Report is copyright. Except as permitted under the Copyright Act, no part of this publication may be reproduced by any process, without the specific written permission of the copyright owner, except that one copy of this Report may be downloaded for free for personal use from the website www.healthreport.com.au. Inquiries should be directed to media@pfizer.com.au

Views expressed in this Report are not necessarily those of Pfizer Australia and no representation is made about the accuracy or completeness of any information contained in it. For advice on any symptoms or conditions referred to in the Report, please contact your health care professional. Contact us for additional copies at media@pfizer.com.au or on 1800 675 229.