

Nasal Congestion and Controlling Your Allergies

*****Nasal Congestion and Controlling Your Allergies (Part 1)*****

Narrator

For as long as he can remember, Television Photographer, Mark Bournes has suffered the misery of allergies.

Mark Bournes, Allergy Sufferer

Springtime, summertime, all the pollens in the air. I was always sneezing, always felt like I had a cold.

Narrator

Mark never knew what the problem was until he was 13 years old. That's when he was diagnosed with allergic rhinitis. This breakthrough changed Mark's life. Finally, he could do something about his suffering.

Mark Bournes, Allergy Sufferer

You can really go throughout your normal daily routine. And you may just have to take a pill in the morning when you get up, or use a nasal spray. And you can get through the day.

Narrator

As many as 40 million people have allergic rhinitis in the United States alone. Let's take a look at what causes so much misery, for so many people. Basically, it's a reaction in the nasal passages to normal substances in the environment, things that don't bother people without allergies.

Gary Rachelefsky, MD, Allergist

They will get a set of symptoms caused by a reaction that occurs in the nose to the allergens.

Narrator

Allergens are things like pollen from trees and weeds, grasses on lawn mowing day, dust mites, mold, and animal dander. The trouble starts when allergens and the allergic person come together.

Mark Bournes, Allergy Sufferer

You sneeze all the time. I mean it's uncontrollable. Even when I drive by somebody, if I have the windows open in the car and somebody's mowing the grass, I can't stop sneezing.

Narrator

All this trouble is caused by the allergic person's immune system. It's the immune system's job to produce antibodies, which help fight off outside invaders like bacteria or viruses. Without this immune response, we'd be sick all the time.

Because of a genetic difference, the allergic person's immune system makes a mistake. It produces abnormal antibodies called Immunoglobulin-E-antibodies or I-g-E antibodies.

Eli Meltzer, MD, Allergist

And that e-antibody, when it meets up with that normal particle, that dust, mold, or pollen, causes a reaction.

Narrator

This reaction leads to the release of certain chemicals in the body, the most well-known histamine. The battle between these chemicals and the invading allergens causes the symptoms so painfully familiar to allergy sufferers. These symptoms include runny nose, sneezing, congestion, nasal itching, and sinus pain. All of which add up to daily misery.

Gary Rachelefsky, MD, Allergist

When you look at patients with allergic rhinitis, patients I see, um they don't feel good. They're tired. They're irritable. They're cranky.

Narrator

Allergic rhinitis is most prevalent among people under the age of 30. This is also when symptoms are the most bothersome. But for millions of allergy sufferers, the misery can last a lifetime.

Mark Bournes, Allergy Sufferer

I have to take a pill every day. Otherwise I can't get through the day.

Narrator

Experts estimate the social cost of allergic rhinitis in the billions, with a "B". That includes direct cost of care, indirect cost from lost workdays, lost school days, and reduced productivity. And of course, there's a personal cost as well.

Eli Meltzer, MD, Allergist

If you're trying to eat your meal and your nose is stuffy, you can't enjoy it as much. If you're trying to have a conversation and you're sniffing, it's not as good. If you're trying to study and your eyes are itching, it's very distracting.

Narrator

Allergic rhinitis has often been referred to as Hay Fever. The name comes from the fact that English farmers in the springtime when hay was growing thought their symptoms were due to the hay, but they were actually due to other grass pollens in the air at the same time. So, who gets allergic rhinitis? One huge factor is genetics! The disease tends to run in families.

Gary Rachelefsky, MD, Allergist

You have to have the genetic predisposition to make this allergy antibody. You inherit that from one or both parents.

Narrator

Sometimes the allergies are seasonal. That's typical when the problem comes from outside sources. This happens most often during spring and fall, when the air is full of pollens. Of course, that depends on where you live.

Eli Meltzer, MD, Allergist

Where I live in Southern California, it's hard actually to pick out the seasons. We actually have pollen in the air almost every month of the year.

Narrator

Mark's job as a television cameraman takes him around the country, throughout the year.

Mark Bournes, Allergy Sufferer

I was in California, it was the wintertime. But it's California, Southern California. When I was out there, I was sneezing like crazy, we were at the park; I couldn't take all the flowers and the pollen.

Narrator

Close to 80 percent of people with the disease have persistent allergic rhinitis, which means they may suffer all year long.

Gary Rachelefsky, MD, Allergist

The patient who has more year-round symptoms has a problem with indoor allergies. Dust mites, mold, furry pets.

Narrator

Mark has persistent rhinitis. So he and his wife have to follow a strict set of rules: no cats in the house. Keep the place as clean and dust-free as possible. And take precautions to keep outside allergens from getting inside.

Mark Bournes, Allergy Sufferer

We run the air conditioning all day long, all the time, even in the winter. Because I can't have all that pollen and stuff getting in the house.

Narrator

Among the most powerful weapons against allergies is awareness, and a willingness to use knowledge to fight back.

Eli Meltzer, MD, Allergist

They need to understand why and what they can do about it, and own the responsibility for taking care of this chronic, or ongoing, persistent problem.

Narrator

Up next, misdiagnosis, it's far too common. We'll show you how to help your doctor get it right the first time. Stay with us.

*******Nasal Congestion and Controlling Your Allergies (Part 2)*******

Narrator

Even though Tim Leonard works as a certified medical assistant for an allergist, he never thought he could have Allergic Rhinitis.

Tim Leonard, Allergy Sufferer

I just thought it was a cold, but it was happening every two, maybe three months: chronic sinus infections, just feeling basically real cruddy.

Narrator

Before the diagnosis, Tim was treating himself with over the counter cold medicines.

Eli Meltzer, MD, Allergist

They'll go to the pharmacy, they'll look at that big shelf with all kinds of red, blue and green boxes, and select something. Which may not be appropriate for their problem, and may not be appropriate for them particularly.

Narrator

These products often contain over the counter antihistamines, which are well known for causing drowsiness and mental cloudiness.

Mark Stein, MD, Allergist

Or they may use over the counter decongestant nose sprays. Which, if used in excess, will actually aggravate the nasal problem and cause more congestion.

Narrator

This is known as "Rebound Stuffiness," and can actually lead to dependence on the nasal spray. These decongestant sprays can also cause high blood pressure, and are best monitored by a physician.

Tim Leonard, Allergy Sufferer

After a while, the process of time, it just wasn't getting any better. So that's when I decided I needed to check out further what it was.

Narrator

Once someone with allergies finally goes to a physician, the doctor will ask in detail about symptoms, and when they occur.

Gary Rachelefsky, MD, Allergist

And if the physician isn't going to ask the questions, then the patient should ask the physician those questions. Or the parent should ask.

Narrator

Doctor Rachelefsky says, about half the patients referred to him by primary care doctors, have been misdiagnosed as having a chronic cold or recurrent sinusitis.

Eli Meltzer, MD, Allergist

Allergic disease generally has a much more protracted, lengthy course. It lasts for weeks, it lasts for months, and in fact in large numbers of people, it lasts for years.

Narrator

Parents can help doctors avoid mistakes by watching their children for certain behaviors. For example:

Gary Rachelefsky, MD, Allergist

We call that the allergic salute and they're doing that because their nose itches and it's stuffy. Or what a lot of children do is rabbit nose, constantly moving their nose around. You look at that person. You know they have (an) allergy. Or their fingers are in their ears. This is characteristic.

Narrator

Another warning sign: breathing through the mouth.

Chester Lindley, Allergy Sufferer

And it's just like so hard because I breathe through my nose and nothing, no air at all.

Narrator

Starting in first grade, Kim Lindley noticed her son Chester got lots of what she thought were colds. Which then developed into ear infections. That went on until one night Chester came into his parent's room, complaining of pain. Kim called a doctor, who prescribed something temporary.

Kim Lindley, Mother

And the next morning he woke up and his ear was just pouring blood.

Narrator

Kim decided to check out the possibility of allergies, which were confirmed by Dr. Rachelefsky. Chester's allergies also explained his developing speech problems.

Kim Lindley, Mother

Because he was so congested and he just didn't hear properly. And we didn't know he didn't hear properly.

Narrator

For Chester, as for all allergy sufferers, once the correct diagnosis is made, proper treatment can begin.

Gary Rachelefsky, MD, Allergist

There's a sort of smorgasbord of intervention, of taking medicines, depending on severity and tolerance.

Narrator

The first step is often one of the more advanced antihistamines; one without the side effects of most over the counter medications.

Eli Meltzer, MD, Allergist

These agents don't cause the sedation, either the sleepiness or the performance impairment. And they do clearly benefit the patients from an itching, sneezing, and a runny-nose standpoint and have been documented to improve quality of life as well.

Narrator

But each patient is different. Oral antihistamines may not be the best medication for everyone. There are a couple of other medications used to try to block allergic reactions before they occur. One is cromolyn sodium, a nasal spray which makes the histamine-releasing cells less sensitive. But for this medication to be effective, it must be taken before a person is exposed to allergens. And it must be taken often.

Eli Meltzer, MD, Allergist

It's a very safe medicine. But it has to be used pretty often to be as effective as we would like it. And sometimes it's a problem to use it 3, 4, 5 times a day. Patients don't seem to remember.

Narrator

The treatment most allergists turn to when other medications aren't quite enough are the nasal corticosteroids.

Eli Meltzer, MD, Allergist

And they actually affect all the symptoms. The itching and the sneezing and the runny and the stuffy. They've been shown to improve quality of life and significantly improve patient wellbeing.

Narrator

Since people often have other illnesses linked to their allergies, treating the Allergic Rhinitis can make asthma, sinusitis, and ear problems better.

Still ahead, allergy shots, are they for everyone? The answer, when we come back.

*******Nasal Congestion and Controlling Your Allergies (Part 3)*******

Narrator

Doctors weigh a number of factors when deciding how to treat patients with allergic rhinitis. One key factor is whether the patient has seasonal or persistent allergies.

Gary Rachelefsky, MD, Allergist

Some people only have symptoms 4-6 weeks a year. So they take the medicine 4-6 weeks, and then that's it.

Narrator

But for those with persistent allergies, it's a different story.

Mark Stein, MD, Allergist

When you have something indoors and outdoors, 24 hours a day, 12 months of a year, you have no place you can go as a safe haven.

Narrator

Persistent allergies usually involve regularly occurring symptoms, and a frequent need for medication. Some people get sick of that. So they opt for immunotherapy or allergy vaccinations, what you may have heard referred to as allergy shots.

The first step is to confirm what the patient is allergic to. Carefully formulated allergens are applied to the body, either on the forearm, or on the back. Then each one is "pricked" into the skin.

After a few minutes, the doctor checks the appearance and size of the patient's reactions.

The goal is to match the cause of the reaction with the proper treatment.

Eli Meltzer, MD, Allergist

How to prepare an allergy vaccine for them. How to develop immunotherapy that has a recipe specifically for that patient, and to be able to monitor them.

Narrator

Once Chester Lindley was finally diagnosed with allergic rhinitis, he was started on a series of shots to reduce his immune response, to actually de-sensitize his body to the pollens, dust mites, and molds he's allergic to.

Chester Lindley, Allergy Sufferer

I've grown used to it. At first it hurt, but now it doesn't hurt at all.

Narrator

Don't get the wrong idea; allergy shots are not just for kids. Cara Luse is on a once-a-month schedule of her own. But Cara has a special reason: she's pregnant. She has to be very careful about taking oral medication.

Cara Luse, Allergy Sufferer

I think they're really working, I mean I feel like they are.

Gary Rachelefsky, MD, Allergist

About 8 to 9 months ago, since she's been on the shots, she's doing very well. And her pregnancy has been almost symptom-free.

Narrator

The immunizations are usually given in combination with other medications. And very often, they work. The symptoms may not completely go away. But, they stop making the allergy sufferer's life miserable.

Tim Leonard, Allergy Sufferer

I took allergy shots for close to four, maybe four and a half years. Um and while I was on that, I was on medicines at the same time. And over time, the allergy shots seemed to improve my allergies to where I don't have to take medicines anymore.

Narrator

Let's set aside pills, nasal sprays, and allergy shots for a moment. One of the most effective ways of dealing with allergies is also one of the simplest: avoid what you're allergic to.

Eli Meltzer, MD, Allergist

If we knew what was triggering it and we could lessen our exposure that would be better.

Narrator

Cara uses an air cleaner to keep her apartment as dust-free as possible. She also has an easy-to-clean floor, without any dust-collecting carpet. And, she stays away from cats. She can't even visit people who have furry pets.

Cara Luse, Allergy Sufferer

And even if people think that moving them out of the room or out of the house, it just doesn't matter. Their hair's everywhere. And the minute I step in the door, it's like itching everywhere.

Narrator

Mark Bournes has the same problem. So of course, cats are banned from his house. But Mark's job as a television photographer sometimes means he's forced to deal with a room full of cat hair.

Mark Bournes, Allergy Sufferer

After I'm in the house for about ten minutes, my lungs start to constrict. And it feels like everything's just tightening up and I can't breathe.

Narrator

Mark learned long ago to pack his medication on road trips. That kind of preparation is simply part of life as an allergy sufferer.

Mark Bournes, Allergy Sufferer

So you just take it when it's that time of year, when you feel you need it, and you just go throughout your normal day, lead your normal life.

Narrator

Taking care of allergic rhinitis is a matter of constant vigilance. That means staying away from furry pets if you're allergic to animal dander. Filtering the air in your home, and changing the filter on a regular basis. Covering your bedding with dust-resistant covers, and making sure the entire home is as low-maintenance and dust-free as possible.

Tim Leonard, Allergy Sufferer

I do have tile throughout my whole house. I do have casings for my pillows and casings for my bedding, and I also do use an electrostatic filter for my air cleaner.

Narrator

And of course, clean, clean, clean. It's important to keep allergens from taking over your environment. Up next slowly, surely the worlds becoming a less irritating place for people with allergies. Reasons for optimism, when we come back.

*******Nasal Congestion and Controlling Your Allergies (Part 4)*******

Narrator

The world can be such a compelling place, full of the beauty of nature. So lovely for most of us, such a problem for others.

Eli Meltzer, MD, Allergist

Pretty much every day you have stuffy and runny and itchy and sneezy. Those are common symptoms.

Narrator

Doctors are working hard to find more and better treatments for allergic rhinitis. One approach to this: identifying suitable candidates, and signing them up for research projects.

Eli Meltzer, MD, Allergist

So what I'd like to do is I'd like to get a breathing test on you now.

Narrator

The volunteers take tests to measure their health, like this lung-function test. Then they're treated, their progress tracked over time. It's clinical trials like these that have led to dramatic advances in treatment.

Eli Meltzer, MD, Allergist

Did you ever think your breath would look like that?

I think allergic disease is often not appreciated for the consequences.

Narrator

Allergists say for all the progress in treatment, much more remains to be done. Of course, the fact most allergies are non-life threatening is a huge plus. But at the same time, from an allergist's point of view, it's also holding back progress.

Gary Rachelefsky, MD, Allergist

So it's very hard for a lot of research dollars to go into that area. But I think it's very important. It's not just that it doesn't kill people, but it affects their life. They miss work, they miss school, they don't function well, they don't produce well. And they get other diseases such as asthma, ear disease and sinus disease. So we need to direct more research to this very common, very life-interfering disease.

Narrator

Currently, there's no cure for allergic rhinitis. But there's no denying the advances of the last three decades, changes that have made life far more pleasant for allergy sufferers.

Eli Meltzer, MD, Allergist

There's dramatic scientific evolvement in just the last 30 years. And I predict that it's going to continue. We understand better what the disease is; we understand what the unmet needs are. And we have the scientific interest and capacity, in the United States more than I think any other country, to fulfill some of the promise of treating the millions of people who suffer from allergic disease.

Narrator

Here's the bottom line: take charge of dealing with your allergies. Find out what you're allergic to. Avoid those allergens as much as possible, which includes removing them from your environment to the extent that you can. Find the right medications to deal with your particular allergies, and use them responsibly. And consider immunotherapy to reduce your body's allergic reaction.

Tim Leonard, Allergy Sufferer

I got help and was able to go onto, not a maintenance medicine but medicines every once in a while that helped. Knowing that there was something out there to help it, and that there was a better way of life.