

## Allergy: The Holistic Approach

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"Allergy" is not a simple phenomena. For some people, allergies are just annoying, while for others, they dominate life and can be fatal. Many of us are allergic when young, get better, and then get more allergic as we get older, becoming sensitive to a progressively larger number of foods and environmental allergens. Inflammation is considered a root cause of many of our modern ills, including aging, arthritis and heart disease. Allergy, whether mild or severe, is a significant cause of inflammation. Many allergies are reversible if the allergy is secondary to a condition of imbalance.

### What Is "Allergy"

Conventional medicine thinks of allergy as a primary disease, in which the immune system reacts to substances called antigens. Whether one has cell-mediated immunity, or antibody-mediated immunity, reactions will vary. In the most common form of allergy, antibodies attach to antigens, and this complex causes a cascade of events, beginning with the release of histamine (which is why we take anti-histamines), which then trigger the common features of allergy--itchiness, swelling, and redness.

In holistic medicine, allergy is thought of as a dysfunction of the immune system which is secondary to other imbalances (which will be discussed below).

When the immune system goes awry, it typically does so in two directions--it becomes over-reactive to things it shouldn't respond to, such as environmental substances (ragweed, dust mites, cat dander,) and foods (peanuts, dairy, etc). It can also react to bodily tissues, causing "auto-immune" diseases that attack the thyroid (hypo and hyperthyroidism), the intestines (inflammatory bowel disease), blood vessels (lupus), the joints (rheumatoid arthritis), the nervous system (multiple sclerosis), the skin (psoriasis) and many others. Once a person has one auto-immune disease, they are at risk for a second--when the immune system is confused, that confusion usually worsens if it is not healed.

The other way the immune system goes awry

is that it becomes under-reactive to other things that it should respond to. The things it should respond to are foreign invaders, such as bacteria, yeast and mold, viruses, toxins, and defective cells that our bodies make, called cancer cells. Such under-reactivity is manifest by recurrent infection, often in the sinuses, but other places as well. A tendency to "catch colds" is another sign of poor immune function.

It is estimated that at any time, we have approximately 100 cancer cells in our body. While this might sound like a lot, it isn't--the body manufactures billions of cells every day, so just a few hundred defects reflects a manufacturing process that is 99.9999% perfect--far better than any one that humans have developed. It takes billions, if not trillions of cells to make a detectible tumor, so by the time a cancer shows up on exam or MRI, it has been there quite a while.

### Food Allergy vs Intolerance

In a conventional allergy, the body must react to a substance with antibodies or a cellular reaction. With foods, this relationship is less clear. One can have a very strong reaction to a food by typical allergy tests (see below), and yet have no symptoms, or visa-versa.

The reason is that more than the immune system is involved in allergy or food intolerance. The nervous and energy systems (chi in Chinese medicine, for example) have an important role, as is proven by the effectiveness of alternative techniques such as acupuncture, hypnosis, NAET and NMT in reducing serious allergies. In addition, the hormonal systems have a significant impact on immune function. Hormones such as cortisol, DHEA and pregnenolone, and the sex hormones, all modulate immune system function (see below). Medications such as opioids also affect the immune system.

Our allergies are not the same from day to day--because they are multi-factorial, they vary with the states of our immune, nervous, hormonal and energetic systems--which is why

holistic medicine conceives of allergy as a multi-system dysfunction.

### **The Gut Modulates Immune Function**

One of the most important, and yet obscure concepts regarding allergy is that *the gut, or gastrointestinal (GI) system, has a powerful influence on the immune system.* The GI system takes up a majority of our insides, and uses 25% of our energy. What we put into it, and how it functions, has been a priority in Chinese and Indian (ayurvedic) medicine and their cultures for thousands of years, but not yet fully appreciated by modern culture or medicine. Even good and bad genes can be turned on or off by how this system works.

The gut can be considered a "tube within a tube" with the contents of the gut officially "outside" the body. (In many ways we are just earthworms with lots of bells and whistles!) The purpose of the gut is to let nutrients into the body without letting bad stuff in, such as bacteria and other chemicals.

The gut is the home to trillions of bacteria, weighing approximately three pounds and representing 400 species! We evolved to carry around these organisms, like a farm, to provide certain functions and substances. In fact, of all the cells that are in and around our body, 90% are *not us!* Treatment with antibiotics, NSAIDs such as Motrin or aspirin, parasite infections and other factors can alter this ecology, allowing for unhealthy bacteria and mold (such as candida) to dominate this internal environment-- a situation called "dysbiosis".

There are "tight junctions" between cells of the gut that act as gates. These gates let good materials into our bodies, and keep out the bad. Alterations of bowel function can alter the integrity of these gates, causing a situation called "leaky gut" which allows bacteria and their products (toxins) into the body. This can overwhelm the body's immune system and detoxification mechanisms (see below).

Besides the tight junctions, the body also protects against these bacteria and yeast by placing over 50% of the immune system cells in this region. This defense can be overwhelmed when the gut becomes "leaky". The observation

that we lose our appetites when we are ill and that people with auto-immune disease often improve when fasting supports the notion that the immune system can be positively or negatively altered by how and what we eat.

The gut also contains a nervous system called the "enteric plexus" that contains as many cells as our spinal cord. This nervous system not only regulates gut function directly, it also produces neuro-hormones and neurotransmitters that can effect every cell of the body, including how we think and feel (we do literally "think with our gut"). This "gut intelligence" is involved with "programming" the immune system about what substances are friends vs foes. The leaky gut can cause immune dysfunction through these mechanisms.

The stomach has an important role in defense and allergy. If it doesn't produce enough acid, due either to dysfunction (aging, stress) or medications (Prilosec, Protonix, Nexium, etc.), the stomach cannot defend against invading bacteria and yeast. In addition, without sufficient acid, the digestion of proteins into amino acids is sub-optimal. When intact proteins enter the intestines, the immune system sees this as invasion and begins to attack--one of the causes of food allergy. Many people become allergic to foods to which they have been over-exposed, including rice, through this mechanism.

Finally, chronic constipation or diarrhea is another sign that the GI system is not working well--in constipation, the toxic contents of the gut have a more time to enter the body. Chronic diarrhea can be a sign of reaction to foods, significant dysbiosis, and can also lead to dehydration and poor absorption of nutrients.

### **Hidden Infection**

As discussed above, we evolved to have bacteria and other organisms within and without us. This is called "colonization" and is considered normal. When an single organism begins to dominate, this is called "infection". The line between colonization and infection is in some cases arbitrary. Recently, science has demonstrated that low-level infection, such as seen in poor oral hygiene, can lead to serious illness such as heart disease. The mechanism for

this is that such infection triggers the immune system to cause a chronic, low-level inflammation, which then attacks many of our tissues, including the blood vessels to our hearts and brains. Hidden infections can occur in the teeth (old root canals and failed fillings), jaw, gut, sinuses, and other cavities.

## **Toxins**

"Exotoxins" come from the outside, and include pesticides, other chemicals, heavy metals, industrial hormones (in dairy and meat), and other sources. "Endotoxins" come from the inside, and represent compounds produced by the liver, released by our fat cells (where many toxins accumulate as we age), released by the amalgam in our fillings, and from the bacteria within us. Each of these toxins, singly, and in combination, can confuse and or weaken the immune and hormonal systems. Some forms of toxicity are blatant, such as after a pesticide exposure. Some are more subtle, such as the chronic mercury exposure that occurs with dental amalgam. Each of us has a different reaction to each toxin, due to our unique biochemistry and the overall toxic load. Therefore, no one chemical is equally bad and no one detoxification process works equally well for everyone. While modern industry studies each chemical individually for its toxicity, there are no studies of the effect of having hundreds of chemicals in our bodies at one time, called "the cocktail effect".

## **Adrenal Fatigue and Chronic Stress**

Our stress system evolved to help us through short bursts of life-threatening situations. 20,000 years ago, when we were chased by a lion, within 20 minutes we either escaped or we were dead (and then natural selection would allow the faster runners to procreate!). After a period of stress, we had time to recover. In modern times, our lifestyles are interpreted by our body as continuous stress. Everything from watching aggressive TV or movies, driving fast, drinking coffee, demanding jobs, or sleeping less than 8 hours activates our stress systems. As one stressor ends another begins, not allowing for recovery. "Adrenal fatigue" is condition where

the adrenal glands fail to keep up with the demand for hormones that are critical to our well being. One of the manifestations of adrenal fatigue can be the full battery of immune dysfunctions--allergy, autoimmune disease, propensity toward infection and cancer. While beyond the subject of this article (look for a future article on this topic), adrenal fatigue is an important consideration in the evaluation and treatment of allergy, and responds to the same holistic approach discussed here.

## **Energy Imbalance**

Both Chinese and Indian (ayurvedic) medicine believe in a flow of energy, called chi or prana, through a system of channels in the body. A blockage in this flow causes both a deficiency downstream from the blockage and an excess flow in the other channels due to this blockage. Manifestations of such energy imbalance can be anything from subtle, intermittent symptoms such as pain, nausea, weakness, light-headedness, PMS, or changes in bowel habits, to full-blown medical conditions such as autoimmune disease or hypertension.

While modern science has not been able to prove or measure this energy, the amazing effectiveness of techniques such as acupuncture and yoga to heal chronic or obscure conditions, especially when modern medicine has failed, is a testimony to it's effectiveness. Indeed, we have never seen an electron but utilize its function throughout our day.

## **Evaluation of Allergy**

Given the above list of root causes, the evaluation of allergy must be holistic to be effective. Simple skin or blood tests may or may not be helpful. The decision of which tests to do, and in which order, is an example of where the art and science of medicine, experience, holism, and intuition come together.

## **Treatment of Allergy**

As implied above, the ideal treatment of allergy is also holistic and multi-modal. No one pill or procedure will produce a "cure". Sometimes, simply improving one's lifestyle, through good sleep, good nutrition (eliminating

the bad and adding good supplements), exercise (walking, yoga, tai chi), and spiritual/meditative work can be very effective. Healing can be enhanced, or may require, the use of special diets (elimination, rotation), detoxification (through special supplements and other procedures) and energy/body-mind work (acupuncture, hypnosis, NAET, etc.). Most people can experience significant improvements, not only in their allergies, but also in their overall health as demonstrated by the hundreds of patients who have succeeded with such an approach.

**IMPORTANT NOTE: This general information should not be used to make decisions about medical care without the involvement of a knowledgeable practitioner.**

#### **For More Information**

- O See Dr. Cheikin's related articles on: Detoxification, Elimination and Simplification and What We Really Need
- O Dr. Cheikin's website, [www.cheikin.com](http://www.cheikin.com), has helpful articles on related topics
- O Dr. Cheikin offers Workshops on Journaling, Chronic Pain, Nutrition, Weight Management and other topics, and classes in yoga, meditation, and other styles of personal health and wellness. Call to be placed on Dr. Cheikin's contact list or if you wish to host a Workshop.
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