

# Spring allergies

Dolors Borau



**My doctor had already warned me** that, after the rainy winter, spring would be tough for both me and my son as we both suffer from allergies. The abundant rainfall means that flowering plants will then blossom after the winter season with heavy pollination.

Fortunately my allergy is seasonal, and is only brought on by a soecific trigger allergen: the pollen of the London plane, that majestic deciduous tree which every spring fills many of the streets in my hometown with its blossom. My son is not so lucky: he suffers from a seasonal allergy too (hayfever in his case), but also has a chronic allergy to dust mites. The first symptoms began to show when he was younger, and it was difficult to tell whether it was just a cold or an allergic reaction. After a number of visits, the paediatrician clarified the problem. Colds crop up occasionally and last for just one week, whereas attacks of allergic rhinitis appear recurrently, although they may last only a short time. There are other differences too: in the case of a cold there is dense mucus, a sore throat, coughing, sneezing and occasionally high temperature, whereas in the case of an allergic reaction the mucus is liquid, accompanied by an itchy rather than sore throat,

more active tear ducts, frequent repeat sneezing but with no high temperature. The problem we found was that with such frequent rhinitis, my son Pau ended up suffering problems with his ears, sinusitis, and ultimately asthma. Given all these symptoms we were referred to an allergologist who performed a series of tests to identify his allergy.

In this case they performed cutaneous tests which involve the intradermal injection of various substances. My poor little boy! I know that it is just a few pricks in the skin, but it is such a pain... I must say that the nurses really knew their stuff, and that Pau was wonderfully behaved. Once they had finished it was a question of waiting to see whether there was a reaction around any of the prick marks. This would mean that the substance in question, inoffensive to so many people, had in his case been identified by his organism as an foreign. When the body believes it is faced with an foreign body it mobilises the immune system to combat it, generating a large volume of antibodies known as immunoglobulin E (IgE).

These specific antibodies instruct the cells to release powerful inflammatory substances, such as histamine, which acts on different parts of the body and causes the symptoms. And that is how we learned that Pau was allergic to grass pollen and dust mites, because where he had been pricked with these substances there was reddening and inflammation.

Allergies cannot be cured, although the symptoms can be controlled. On occasion a doctor will need to prescribe medication (decongestants, antihistamines, corticoids...) and the treatment must be followed to the letter. Some cases can also now be treated

## What to do?

Once the causes of analogy are known certain advice can be put into practice. In the case of pollen: one should not spend too long outdoors during periods of pollination, above all at sunset, which is when the greatest quantity is in suspension. In the case of dust mites, bed linen should be changed and washed every week at 60° C at least.

with immunotherapy (specific vaccination against the allergens responsible), and while this does not cure the condition it does reduce the number of symptoms and makes control easier.

Knowing the causes of the allergies was of great benefit, as that way we were able to follow the advice we were given. Pollen allergy sufferers, for example, need to know that the wind is their enemy, as it scatters the substance, while rainy days are the best, washing the pollen down to the ground; one should not spend too long outdoors during periods of pollination, above all at sunset, which is when the greatest quantity is in the air; rooms should be aired early in the morning or in the evening, keeping temperatures cool; during the day the windows of the house should be kept closed, the same principle applying when travelling by car. The truth of the matter is that, when spring comes around, if you know how to prevent contact with the allergen the symptoms improve.

With a chronic allergy this is more difficult, as the allergen is constantly present. As there is dust everywhere, it is impossible to live without being in contact with mites, microorganisms of the arachnid family which live in mattresses and pillows and feed on the flakes or cells of dead skin which people leave behind. How disgusting, I thought when it was explained to me! It is the excrement of these little bugs that causes the allergy. There is no way of ridding a house of mites, and so one must be disciplined and clean effectively to reduce their numbers to the minimum. Particular care must be taken with bed linen, using non-porous



protective covers for mattresses and pillows; sheets should be changed and washed every week, at least at 60° C; bedrooms should ideally not be frequented during the day; the relative humidity in the house should remain below 60%; avoid rugs, feather pillows and woollen blankets; vacuum frequently, and in the case of younger children, keep cuddly toys out of the room

where they sleep.

Pau found it so hard to understand why the few teddy bears he had would be put in the washing machine on a hot wash, while he learned to sleep with a plastic soldier in his hand. All in all it means extra efforts to clean and tidy, but for a worthwhile purpose.

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