

Allergy: a modern epidemic

how homeopathy can help, by *Sarah Buckingham* and *Jacqueline Mardon* reviews one of her cases

Many people are genetically predisposed to allergies – this is known as atopy and you often see allergies such as eczema, asthma and hay fever running in families. Atopy is becoming more common and the reasons for this are not entirely clear. One theory is that people have much better health these days and the body's immune system doesn't have a lot to cope with, so goes into "overdrive" in response to normally harmless substances.

There is some evidence to suggest that those who have grown up with lots of brothers and sisters are likely to have had numerous infections in childhood which their immune systems have had to fight off and so have simultaneously built up resistance to allergens; so perhaps the trend towards smaller families is a factor.

Other possible contributing factors include increased pollution in the atmosphere and the use of chemicals in food, medicine and household products. Whatever the cause, more and more people are becoming susceptible; an estimated three million people in England alone now consult their GP each year about an allergy-related condition.

What is allergy?

Allergy is a heightened or altered reactivity of the immune system to external substances. Conditions that are caused by an external agent or "allergen" include eczema, allergic asthma, urticaria (hives), hay fever and perennial rhinitis (all year round hay fever-like symptoms). The most common allergens are house dust mites, pollen from trees and grasses, cats, dogs, milk and eggs.

An allergic person's immune system believes allergens to be damaging and so produces a special type of antibody (IgE) to attack the invading material. This leads other blood cells to release further chemicals (including histamine) which together cause the symptoms of an allergic reaction. A reaction can be caused by inhalation, swallowing, injection, or contact with the skin, eyes or airways. In mild cases there may be slight itchiness or reddening of the affected area. In serious cases anaphylactic shock can



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occur, where the body's immune response is so extreme that it causes low blood pressure, constriction of breathing and sometimes even death. But this subject is too complex to be covered here.

Treatment

Conventional medicine often involves taking antihistamines or steroids to

manage symptoms. A huge range of products is also available over the counter. These may be useful but can also have unwanted side-effects like drowsiness, need to be used continuously and are not effective in all patients.

By contrast, homeopathic medicine stimulates the body's own defence system to cope with exposure to allergens,

rather than suppressing the allergic symptoms. Often, treatment doesn't have to be taken continually – for example, a homeopathic medicine taken before the start of the hay fever season can protect the patient through the whole season, reducing the need for antihistamines.

There are a number of ways in which homeopathy can be used to help allergy sufferers.

Local prescribing

Medicines are prescribed based on the patient's actual allergic symptoms, for example runny nose, itchy eyes, sore throat. This is known as "local" treatment and can be achieved in a standard GP appointment or even through self-prescribing, although it's probably best to visit a homeopathic doctor to get the correct medicine, as you are less likely to pick the right one off the shelf first time.

Constitutional prescribing

Constitutional treatment in homeopathy is slightly different. It is based on a more in-depth consultation which takes into account not only the allergic symptoms but also the patient's individual way of coping with the disease. This may involve looking at aspects of the patient's lifestyle, eating habits, medical history and state of mind to achieve a complete picture of the individual.

Isopathy

Isopathy is similar to homeopathy, but the treatment is selected solely on the basis of the patient's proven allergies (as shown by skin testing, for example). It involves giving a patient the substance to which they are allergic in a homeopathic potency.

It is best to arrange a consultation with a homeopathic doctor so that they can tailor treatment to you as an individual. Each of the five NHS homeopathic hospitals takes referrals for allergy; the hospitals in Glasgow and London have specialist allergy clinics.

The allergy crisis

The health service is struggling to provide adequately for allergy sufferers. While it's thought that the government is keen to devolve allergy care increasingly to GPs, there are concerns that not enough GPs are trained in allergy to be able to provide adequate treatment. A report by the Lords Science and Technology Select Committee last year found that there is "a severe shortage

of allergy specialists" in the UK and that clinical services "lag behind" others in Europe.

The report recommended "robust research" into complementary treatments for allergy. This echoes a report on CAM published by the same committee in 2000, which advocated the creation of a stronger research infrastructure for complementary therapies. At the time the Department of Health allocated limited funds, but none went towards research in homeopathy. This is disappointing, especially in view of the potential for savings on conventional medicines such as steroids.

To date, 13 randomised controlled trials have been carried out in allergy, nine of which had positive findings, clearly demonstrating that the area needs further investigation. There is, of course, no need to convince those patients who have used homeopathy with success. Their own positive experiences are proof enough for them that homeopathy works. At Bristol Homeopathic Hospital, a six-year study of patient outcomes found that 89 per cent of under 16s with asthma reported improvement and 75 per cent felt "better" or "much better", as did 68 per cent of eczema patients under 16.

Homeopathy clearly has an important role to play in allergy treatment. The current burden on the health system could be alleviated if more GPs were trained in homeopathic medicine or were able to refer to a homeopathic clinic or hospital. More reasons why homeopathy is a vital part of the NHS and should remain there.

Case study

Jacqueline Mardon describes the treatment of one of her allergy patients:

Allergy is a fascinating and satisfying area to work in homeopathically. There is great variety in the way people can present, and a challenging potential to significantly make a difference to their lives, particularly as there are often not a lot of options open to them. A diverse group of patients is seen at the Glasgow Homeopathic Hospital Allergy Clinic. As well as asthma, eczema and other atopic conditions, I also see people with food sensitivities and intolerances and people with multiple sensitivities who are often desperate.

A strong and sensitive lad

Joe, an 18 year-old lad, was referred by his GP with longstanding atopy prob-

lems in the form of asthma, eczema and allergic keratoconjunctivitis (severe inflammatory eye condition). Even with several months of immunosuppressant treatment (with corticosteroids and cyclosporin), he had flare-ups every few weeks. His parents were concerned about the impact on his confidence and life, particularly since he was due to leave home shortly for university.

Joe has reddish-blond hair and is tall and bony with a very inflamed complexion and extremely dry, unhealthy-looking skin with cracks and excoriations. He came to the clinic with his mother and seemed quite reserved, rather downcast, self-conscious and polite. He did not look at me much.

His skin problems started at 18 months-old with scratching behind his ears and itchy eyes. He is described by his mother as intuitive and sensitive to people, just as she is. He had an unfortunate experience of being bullied at primary school and had to move school, which resolved the problem. When he was eight, his mother was away from home during weekdays for two years. He missed her a lot and was anxious about it. He is the youngest of four sons and the only one still at home. Two brothers have eczema.

Joe's skin condition is aggravated during really hot weather. He has a big appetite and is averse to fish, shellfish and spicy food. At the age of two he had a very rapid onset of his face and eyelids swelling up and his lips puffing up with shellfish. If he puts fish like salmon to his mouth, he has spots on his tongue within a few minutes. He can only tolerate tuna, either fresh or tinned, which he likes. He loves fruit, salads, chocolate, meat and mild curry. He's had a dental brace for 18 months.

He has had surgery to his corneas and treatment with steroid eye-drops from the age of seven until he was 14. There was concern that he might develop cataract, which can be a complication of this. Since then, he has Opticrom eye drops and antihistamines.

When his skin flares (usually affecting his inner elbows, under his neck and behind his knees), his eyes can flare up too. The inside of the lids can swell up and feel gritty and there is a yellowish-green discharge. It may be hard to open his eyes when he wakes up and the left eye is slightly worse.

He has tried food exclusion diets with no real benefit. Recent skin prick tests showed reaction to horse hair, cat fur, pollens and a big reaction to house



Photo: istockphoto.com/John Phillip Young

dust mite. Blood tests have shown levels of response to house dust mite “off the scale”!

His asthma is fine now and he takes a regular inhaled steroid, is not prone to chest infections and manages to perform sport, which he loves, to a high competitive level. He loves to shake hands at the end of the match. His mother says he is a gracious sportsman. He says he doesn't like partying all the time!

Treatment

Joe is clearly distressed and embarrassed about his highly visible problems. He is anxious to relieve his eye symptoms and I did consider a local or pathological remedy. For keratoconjunctivitis, Silica, Ruta, Thiosinaminum or Graphites might be indicated. However, I felt the first approach with a prescription should be the constitutional remedy Natrum muriaticum, for which there seemed strong grounds in terms of his appearance and demeanour and also the history of separation from his mother, which had affected him and may have coincided with the experience of being bullied at school. I chose to give Natrum Muriaticum as 30c, 200c and 1M potencies and then as daily LM1 drops. I also gave concurrent isopathic desensitisation with House Dust Mite, also in the LM1 potency, just a few drops twice a week. The LM potencies are much less likely to cause aggravation, an important consideration in such a sensitive and atopic individual.

Two months later

Joe returned on his own to tell me his eyes had been good, the best for a while with no bad days since his last visit. His skin had been quite dry and itchy. He appeared much more relaxed (in retrospect and in contrast I realised how tight he had been) and his skin generally less red. His neck was a bit blotchy, perhaps an indicator of his emotional sensitivity.

He had left home and started his university course three weeks before and was returning to see his parents every weekend. He had managed to stop all his medication except the Opticrom. He felt he had had a good initial response with the homeopathy with his eyelids and was pleased about this.

I gave Natrum muriaticum as LM2 and House Dust Mite as LM2, in the same way as before. He also told me his new accommodation was nice and he had “allergy sheets”.

Six months later

His skin had been generally good with a slight recent irritation on his back after he wore rubber and fibre gloves to garden. His eyes had been fine, with

some itching the previous week going to bed and redness on waking, which lasted a couple of hours. He noted that this was when the birch pollen count was high, to which he is known to be sensitive. His studying was going fine and he had exams soon. He saw the ophthalmologist again who said his eyes are stable. Joe thought his eyes had been bad only a very few days since starting university. My impression was he seemed more relaxed and his skin was very calm. I gave a slight increase to LM3 potency for Natrum muriaticum and House Dust Mite.

Five months on

When I next saw Joe he had spent time in the summer with his parents who had moved to an old and dusty house. His skin got worse and he had two courses of antibiotics for impetigo. Since returning to his new student flat which is clean, his skin was much improved! He told me his ophthalmologist had been thrilled. He was told that no one examining his eyes now would think anything had been wrong with them! He now has an annual follow-up for his eyes.

I gave Natrum muriaticum alone, as LM4 potency, and advised he could try tailing this to use every two days or less, with the option to increase again if needed. I offered a review for six months.

It has been very instructive to meet Joe and understand something of his experience of this relatively rare and distressing condition of allergic keratoconjunctivitis. Certainly, there was a change in environment and many life circumstances, but homeopathy and isopathy played a part in the dramatic improvement in his long-standing condition and he certainly seemed to lighten and blossom too.

He actually became less competitive in his sport and seemed happy that it did not seem to grip his life so much. He had been promoted to a higher team, but actually found it too much of a strain and enjoyed the second team more. He seemed more playful and life was more fun.

Perhaps he will even end up partying longer, despite his original assertion!

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