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ALL about YOU

HEALTH

FATAL REACTION

ALLERGY ALERT

■ House dust mites (HDM) are responsible for a lot of allergic reactions. There are almost 40,000 of the easily inhaled HDM per speck of dust. But do not despair. Cold water kills about 90 per cent of HDM, dry cleaning minimises them and direct exposure to sunlight completely destroys them. Avoid carpets and dust traps like dry flowers and soft toys in your décor scheme.

■ Allergic reactions from alcohol are because of the ingredients present in it - grapes in wine, grains like barley, rye or wheat in others, combined with yeast. The symptoms may be exactly like those of any other food intolerance. The only prevention is to completely avoid alcohol.

■ In the Latex-Fruit Syndrome, people are allergic to otherwise harmless fruits like banana, pineapple, avocado, kiwi, mango, strawberry and soy. Avoid the intake of these fruits and get a food allergy test done.

■ The dander, which comes from pets' saliva, causes skin and nasal irritations. Besides getting an allergy test done, clean your pet regularly. Use good quality shampoos and brushes to clean the dander.



In its mildest form, an allergy is distressing. At its most severe, it can kill. One of the most common afflictions in life, particularly modern life, allergies need to be taken in control. Otherwise, they will control you.

By Pallavi Shankar

Bree Van de Camp, the icy Ms Fix-It played by Marcia Cross in the popular TV series *Desperate Housewives*, committed first-degree murder. She served her husband onions, which he was acutely allergic to. Rex had a miserable end, rapid but devastating. Sounds like an unlikely story, but then again, allergies are deadly. They remain passive if controlled, but become monsters if allowed to get

out of hand.

In everyday lives, they can determine how you live, sleep and exercise, what you eat, whether you can keep a pet or even what medicines you can take. For those who are allergic, everything from contraceptive choices to artificial jewellery becomes a potential hazard. Some allergies like asthma or those to edibles like alcohol, wine, seafood, shellfish, eggs, mushrooms or milk can land people into medical emergencies. Others

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demand an urgent and persistent lifestyle rethink and the will to manage them with precaution and care for all of one's life.

An allergy is an exaggerated reaction to substances, situations or a physical state. It is triggered by an allergen, which may enter the body when you inhale, consume or come in physical contact with it. In each case, it causes the body to release a chemical called histamine which in turn leads to reactions like sneezing seizures,

inflammation and skin rashes, stomach aches, nausea and vomiting, and in extreme cases, a severe reaction in the internal organs.

Shorter relaxation spans combined with climatic changes, pollution and increased amount of pesticides and other chemicals in the food we eat are some of the key reasons for the rise of the kinds of allergies and the number of people suffering from them. A decade-long study by Mumbai-based allergy specialist Dr Wiqar A.I.

Shaikh illustrates this. He attempted to map the 'desi' allergy index and found that the number of people suffering from it had increased from 25 per cent in 1997 to 29 per cent in 2007. Published in the April 2008 issue of *Journal of the Indian Medical Association*, the research studied different kinds of allergies prevalent in India. Pollen from flowering plants was found to be a common trigger. This seasonal allergy is particularly rampant in the harvest months and is peculiar to northern ▶

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COUNTERING ALLERGY

■ Allergy tests ELISA and Skin Prick Test cost anything between Rs 9,000 and Rs 10,000 (approx). For those undergoing immunotherapy, one vaccine costs Rs 800 (approx) for 16 injections. The cost may increase or decrease depending on the specific requirements of the patient.

■ Holistic remedies like homeopathy also offer anti-allergy treatments. The cost is Rs 8,000 (approx) for one year in multi-chain clinics while in single clinics the cost is Rs 600 (approx) for one dose of homeopathy that lasts for 15 days.

► India. "Pollen travels as far as 300 km and is suspended in the air. It triggers allergic reactions in a large population, including young children," says Dr Shubnum Singh, clinical allergist, Max Healthcare, Delhi. "Higher carbon dioxide levels in cities cause ragweed, loblolly pines, poison ivy and other plants to produce more potent allergens," adds Dr Isaac Mathai, medical director of Soukya International Holistic Health Centre, Bengaluru.

Dr Shaikh also found in his study that, in India, allergens carried by house dust mites (HDM) and cockroaches are responsible for 50 per cent of these cases. HDM excrete a protein that settles on dust and gets airborne. When inhaled, it causes allergic rhinitis and aggravates asthmatic conditions. Also called rhinorrhoea, it is one of the most common forms of allergies the world over and affects about 25-30 per cent of the general population.

So are allergies primarily an urban affliction? Yes and no. They could be something you are born with or a condition you inherited or acquired, but the prevalence of allergies is certainly found to be higher in the urban population. It's important to know that allergies should not be taken lightly and 'treated' by merely suppressing the reaction with an anti-allergen or a visit to the GP. In fact, people prone to an allergy may usually end up with multiple ones. There is a good chance that allergic rhinitis, pollen asthma, hypersensitivity to mosquito bites and reaction to vinegar can occur in one person all together. The treatment, trickily, is the same but the prevention chart varies



According to a recent report of the World Allergy Organization in the US, the estimated economic costs of allergies have exceeded those of tuberculosis and AIDS

dramatically, making it important for allergic people to review their entire lifestyle. Carrying anti-allergic medication should be non-negotiable for allergic personalities who can develop multiple complications with one trigger.

In the West, patients are issued an allergy card that specifies their condition and its triggers. It can be a lifesaver in emergencies, when the person may be unconscious. Even if your doctor has not issued it, keep an allergy marker with specifics in your bag at all times. The dictum is simple. In case of an accident, shout out your allergy, if possible; if not, make sure the information in your bag has been placed in a way that can be easily found.

Allergic people need to take stock of themselves as an ongoing project. Some allergies decrease with age, others worsen. Treatment needs to be individualised depending on the triggers, and prevention is the first and most important step. Anti-allergens can only treat the reaction, and not the allergy itself. "Blood tests like RIA, ELISA and Skin Prick Test are reliable ways of diagnosing

them. Once this is identified, immunotherapy is the only way to change the body's immunological response. It requires taking vaccines over a period of time. The quantity and duration is determined by the intensity of the problem," says Dr Singh.

Homeopathy, which considers the personality type while treating physical symptoms, is a viable alternative. While all allergic reactions worsen with stress, some instantly disappear if the emotional trigger is removed. Dr S.K. Sharma, senior homeopath at the Ethos Mind and Body Clinic, Delhi, recalls a youngster who developed an allergy to silk clothes after failing to clear an examination. After three months of medication and counselling, he eventually overcame it.

Though allergies are one of the most widely reported conditions, they are not taken seriously. Even if yours is a minor problem, get an assessment done so you can learn how to deal with its graph of highs and lows. This will help you evaluate your life's choices, and make your environment as safe for you as possible. ■

PHOTOGRAPH: CORBIS AND DINODIA