

Article 2 – Allergies, Part Two.

The previous article on allergies was the first part of a two part series, explaining how allergies come about and how the immune system is involved. The aim of this article is to look at what can be done to reduce or control allergies. There are two important things to look at when it comes to doing this – identifying and eliminating the triggers, and changing the way the immune system responds to the situation.

The most efficient way to identify the triggers is to get a hair sample test done. This tests the immune system's response to 90 different foods, food chemicals, environmental chemicals and allergens, and has also proven to be reliable in testing for infection with Streptococcus and Staphylococcus bacteria and mixed Candida strains. The response is graded from low to high which indicates how reactive that food/substance is and whether it needs to be removed from the diet or whether exposure to it simply needs to be reduced. In my experience it has proven to be very reliable, consistently confirming previously diagnosed conditions such as Celiac disease where there is an extreme intolerance to gluten-containing grains for example. Skin prick tests (which can be organized by your doctor) can be helpful, but only pick up allergies which are IgE antibody based or histamine driven. Other reactions such as delayed sensitivity reactions which involve IgG or IgM antibodies will not register with a skin prick test and this is where the hair test is invaluable. Hair tests are available through the clinic.

To change the way the immune system responds, there are two things we need to achieve. The first is to control the flow of inflammatory chemicals within the body, and the second (which is related) is to turn the volume down in the over-active part of the immune system.

To control the inflammation we can use herbs such as Chamomile which is a very effective antihistamine, or Turmeric or Perilla frutescens which block the production of certain inflammatory chemicals (IL4, IL5 and IL13 specifically) which lowers the overall Th2 response. (See last month's article for an explanation of what Th2 is and how it works). Turmeric can be taken as a tea using 1 tsp of the powder to a cup of hot water twice per day or as a tincture, and Perilla is available as capsules through the clinic. Turmeric has the added advantage in that it improves liver and digestive function at the same time.

When using Chamomile, supermarket tea bags will not usually have much effect because much of the essential oil in them has disappeared but good quality whole dried or fresh flowers generally work very well. To get the best effect, steep 2-3 heaped tsp of flowers for 15-20 minutes in 250ml of boiling water in a covered vessel and strain before drinking. Drink 3 cups per day during the hay fever season. This can also be used to provide relief for itchy eyes by applying a cotton ball soaked in the liquid to the eyes for a minimum of 10 minutes. IgE mediated eczema will often benefit from the same treatment. However, like pharmaceutical antihistamines, this only reduces the symptoms and it is still necessary to get to the root cause.

As I mentioned in the previous article, allergies are always a sign that the immune system is out of balance. A summary of major contributors to this imbalance includes: DEHYDRATION, POOR DIET, POOR DIGESTION, DISTURBED GUT HEALTH, and POOR LIVER FUNCTION. Any one of these can have a significant impact on the health of the immune system and must be corrected if long term improvement is desired.

Water intake is very closely linked to histamine production in the body. This is because histamine is a key neurotransmitter used in the control of water regulation

and the drought management programs of the body. When we become dehydrated our histamine levels automatically rise, and in an allergy-prone person this is like adding fuel to the fire. For people with allergic asthma or hay fever, increasing water intake can make a significant difference to the number and severity of attacks. Please note: I am talking about good old H₂O not a substitution with other beverages, and 8-10 glasses distributed throughout the day are required. If you are not drinking this daily, dehydration will be a contributing factor to your problems. It takes approximately 3-4 weeks to re-hydrate properly and this is when the benefit is felt by most people.

Salt has had a lot of bad press in recent years but the fact remains that, along with potassium, it is a vital part of our water regulation mechanism. Sodium which is found in salt, is a major electrolyte used in the distribution and retention of water in the body. In a dehydrated person, histamine will be used by the body to constrict lung tissue in an effort to reduce water loss through breathing. The down side is that in a chronically dehydrated person this is likely to also increase the sensitivity of the lung tissue to allergens. Touching a wet finger into salt, putting it on the tongue and following it with water can relax the lung tissue very quickly, especially in the case of allergic or exercise-induced asthma. The introduction of a very small, concentrated amount of salt along with water has been shown to signal the brain to lower histamine production because it sends the message that both water and the means to use it have been provided. This reduces histamine production in the lungs which means that the bronchial tissues relax.

Another less well known contributor to keeping histamine levels in check is the role played by amylase, one of our pancreatic carbohydrate-digesting enzymes and this is where good digestion comes in. Amylase is a natural histamine balancer in that it acts to stabilise mast cells and basophils (immune cells) which release histamine during an allergic response. When histamine levels start to rise in the body, more amylase and protease (another enzyme) are produced, partly because increased digestive resources are one of our front line defenses against potential ingested allergens and partly because they are used to prevent the histamine response from getting out of hand. The over-consumption of high carbohydrates such as bread, other baked items, pasta and potatoes etc... can chronically deplete amylase (often resulting in symptoms of bloating, flatulence, indigestion and irregular bowel habits) which will increase the likelihood of histamine-related health problems such as hay fever, asthma and eczema. A reduction in histamine levels can be achieved by reducing the amount of high carbohydrates in the diet to a minimum and by using herbs which improve the pancreatic function. This also has wonderful flow on benefits as far as blood sugar control and weight loss are concerned.

Improving digestive function is always a very important part of the allergy-control picture because where ever there are foods not being broken down properly, there will be an increased call on the immune system to help with the clean-up. Chewing food thoroughly, maintaining good stomach acidity and pancreatic function are vital here. The more regularly the immune system is exposed to partially digested food, the greater the chances are that intolerances or sensitivities will develop. Improperly digested food changes the chemical environment in the gut and is a major contributing factor to gut flora imbalances, and as I have mentioned before, the gut flora combined with certain immune cells called T cells are a vital part of the mechanism which keeps the immune system on track.

When the above issues have been addressed, plant medicines such as Aswaganda, Baical skullcap, Feverfew, Siberian ginseng and Astragalus can be used

to restore the balance between the various T cells, which then controls the over-all reactivity of the immune system.

Whenever I am working with an allergic patient, removing the triggers, addressing de-hydration and the health of their digestive system are always priorities. Other aspects which impact enormously on the ability of the immune system to stay in balance are the presence of parasites (worms), the ability of the liver to detoxify chemicals, and the effective elimination of heavy metals. These are assessed according to individual needs.

If you would like to address allergy issues further, you are welcome to contact me at The Self Heal Clinic on 06-304 8177 or call into the Cotter St dispensary on Tuesday, Thursday, Friday or Saturday.