



Sneeze, wheeze, itch...

...understanding the terrible trio! Juliet Gellatley, founder & director of the VVF, looks at the link between eczema, asthma and hay fever and how diet can help you.



The figures are pretty startling – one in 12 Brits has asthma, one in five children and one in 12 adults has eczema and a quarter of us sneeze our way through the summer with hay fever. All three conditions are related so it's no surprise that some people suffer from more than one and there is often a family history.

All allergies are on the increase, with hay fever doubling in the last 20 years! The Royal College of Physicians now refers to it as an epidemic. The 'hygiene hypothesis' or 'fussy parent syndrome' may be one reason. Obsession with baby cleanliness could mean that children grow up unable to fight bacteria as their immune systems have not had a chance to mature. The result is an excessive reaction to 'allergens' – in the case of hay fever, pollen, dust mite poo or cat saliva.

Global warming also plays a role as it has extended the season and pollution may be involved, too. Instead of pollen grain proteins being washed away, they stick to particles in the air and are then inhaled. But none of this explains why children are just as likely to develop asthma in the middle of a metropolis or the back of beyond.

Children in richer countries, however, are more at risk. The theory is that the richer we are, the better we insulate our homes, giving dust mites the perfect place to breed. We also fill our houses with TVs, computer games and gadgets and then spend more time indoors alongside the mites and mould.

It's also true that the wealthier we get, the more our children suffer from malnutrition! A massive UK diet and nutrition survey published in 2000 looked at the eating

habits of four to 18 year olds and made grim reading. About 80 per cent of kids are guzzling high-fat dairy and meat products, white bread, savoury snacks, biscuits, chips and chocolate. Between 60 and 75 per cent had not eaten any citrus fruits or leafy green vegetables during the week of the survey.

I believe that as our children's diet declines, their immune system fails to develop healthily and allergies are one of the consequences.

What links the trio?

Changes triggered in the body are similar with all three conditions – atopic (usually inherited) eczema, asthma and hay fever.

Our immune system includes millions of antibodies to fight disease and each one recognises a specific invader. No one knows why, when people with allergies are exposed to such harmless invaders such as pollen, cat or dog saliva, feathers, cow's milk, eggs or shellfish, antibodies called IgE are formed. They attach themselves to histamine-rich mast cells in skin tissue and respiratory and digestive tracts. When the invader appears again, the IgE antibody grabs hold of it and tells the mast cell to release its histamine, which then provokes an allergic response which causes inflammation.

This process is essential for fighting harmful invaders such as bacteria but in the case of eczema, asthma and hay fever, is entirely OTT. It's called hypersensitivity type 1.

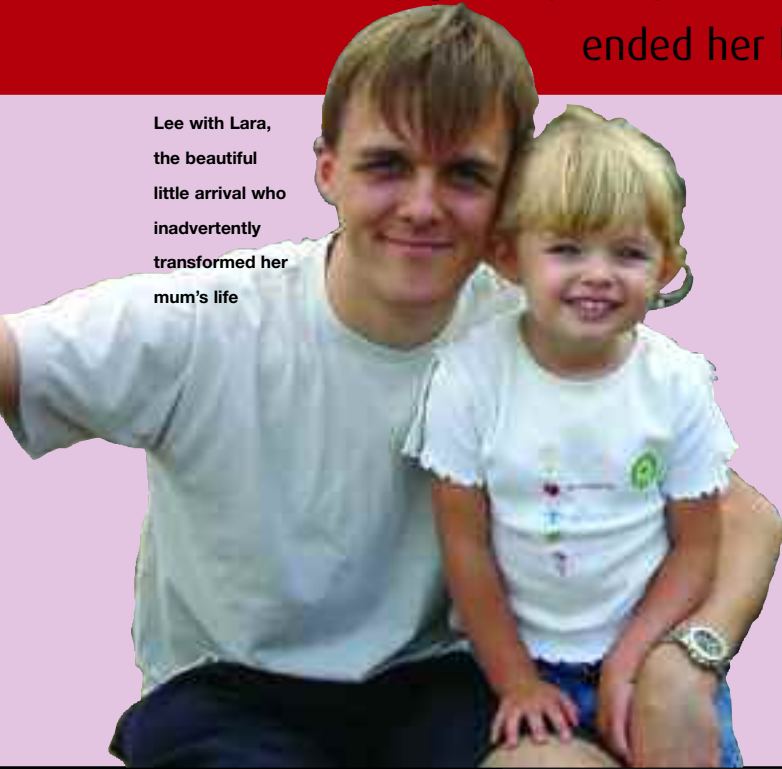
Inflammation causes blood capillaries to widen, allowing

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The Abandoned Arthritic

Emma Bradley gave up dairy for moral reasons and finds it has almost ended her life-long arthritis

Lee with Lara, the beautiful little arrival who inadvertently transformed her mum's life



Throughout my life, I've been dogged by two health problems – rheumatoid arthritis and being overweight.

Rheumatoid arthritis can be extremely painful and is commonly seen as an old person's disease but can affect anyone at any age. I was diagnosed at just 18 months old and as a consequence have spent much of my life taking drugs and undergoing physiotherapy and hydrotherapy simply to stay mobile.

During flare-up periods, I needed help to get out of bed and to go to the toilet whereas in the quiet times I was able to walk reasonable distances and even do aerobics classes. This, of course, is the nature of arthritis.

But what caused the flare-ups? I had no idea – until recently. I am convinced it was milk and dairy products.

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increased blood flow to the area, bringing more antibodies to fight the invader. The result is redness and warmth. Water seeps from capillaries in an attempt to dilute any potential poisons and this results in swelling which increases pressure on nerve endings, causing pain.

If the mast cells are located in the lining of the nose, they produce mucus and result in a runny nose – hayfever! If in the lining of the lungs, a combination of mucus and a contraction of the airways results in asthma. If the allergic response is in the skin, it's labelled eczema.

These conditions are often inherited but may have to be triggered. With identical twins, one may have eczema but the chances are one-in-five that the other twin will not. Triggers differ from person to person and include stress, so if one twin avoids stress, they may avoid eczema.

Foods that protect us

While some foods trigger allergies, others protect us. In almost 30 per cent of children with eczema, food may be a trigger while in 10 per cent, it is the main trigger. The most common triggers are cow's milk and eggs and, to a lesser degree, fish, soya, wheat and nuts (National Eczema Society,

2003). A study in Finland showed that if a breastfeeding mum's diet is high in animal fats and low in omega-3, the risk of her baby developing eczema increases.

On the other hand, Dutch research showed that people who eat the most fruit and vegetables have the healthiest lungs. Vitamin C from fresh fruit and veg and vitamin E from nuts and seeds, avocados, tomatoes and wholegrains may reduce the severity of asthma attacks. A nutrient-rich diet can also boost the immune system and help ward off colds and flu – both common asthma triggers (Asthma UK 2006).

Trials have shown that rubbing omega-3-rich oils on children helps alleviate eczema as do diets rich in omega 3s. These good fats are found in oils from flaxseed, rapeseed and soya as well as nuts (especially walnuts) and leafy green veg.

You can't get away from exercise, with regular exercising essential to keep the heart, bones and digestive system healthy and to keep weight off. It also helps to strengthen the lungs and can therefore improve asthma. Asthma UK say that one in three children doesn't exercise because they have asthma and yet, ironically, they need it the most.

Stress is incredibly damaging so use your health as the perfect excuse to de-stress your life – easier said than done I know! And finally, stop smoking – no excuses here at all!