

allergy &  
asthma

# ISSUES

a seasonal guide for relief

Winter 2008



**AAAI**  
AMERICAN ACADEMY OF ALLERGY  
ASTHMA & IMMUNOLOGY

## LOOK FORWARD TO SPRING WITH IMMUNOTHERAPY

By Andy Nish, MD, FAAAAI

Spring's arrival is anticipated after the long, cold, dreary winter. But with warm weather, sunny days and budding trees also come thick clouds of pollen blanketing our cars, tickling our noses and irritating our lungs.

For the estimated 40 percent of Americans with allergic rhinitis, or hay fever, the changing seasons are dreaded. The great news is it doesn't have to be that way. With a little preparation, you can still breathe in all that spring offers.

Immunotherapy, commonly called 'allergy shots,' is effective in reducing or eliminating seasonal allergy symptoms in up to 90 percent of patients. Make an appointment with your allergist now and find relief this spring and summer.

Allergies commonly cause sneezing, a runny nose, nasal congestion and itchy watery eyes. These symptoms can lead to loss of sleep and impair performance at work or school. I am often amazed at how much people are willing to tolerate before seeking treatment.

While there is no cure for allergies, immunotherapy is the next best thing. Allergy shots have been shown to improve allergies, asthma and sinus problems, and may prevent the development of future sensitivities.

*Immunotherapy, continued on page 4*

## MY STORY

*Patricia*

Gainesville, GA

When I first moved to Georgia, my allergy symptoms got worse. I was always congested, needed antihistamines and had trouble with my asthma.

My allergist, Dr. Nish, recommended I start allergy shots. I began to notice results after just a few months. Now, a few years later, I no longer need any antihistamines and rarely have problems with my asthma.

Allergy shots have given me back a normal way of life that I could not enjoy previously due to allergies.



## PACK SMART WHEN TRAVELING

By Andrew W. Murphy, MD, FAAAAI

While winter is a season for getting together or getting away, it is also a time for allergy patients to be extra vigilant. Whether your plans involve visiting extended family or an escape to a hotel room in a warm climate, potential dangers abound for those with allergies. Allergy and asthma sufferers should follow these simple steps to **PACK** right and enjoy the season:

**P**lan ahead. Think about where you are going and how you will get there. If you are traveling by air, train or boat, remember that you may need to go through security and it is best to have all your medication in its original packaging so there are no questions. Take your medications onboard with you, or a lost suitcase could become a health crisis.

**A**nticipate problems and hidden allergens. Your relatives' pets may make your asthma symptoms flare. Homemade foods don't have ingredient lists and cross-contamination is a threat. Be sure your asthma is well controlled before you travel. Make

your food allergies known and ask about ingredients. Take precautions and always have your rescue medicines available.

**C**ontinue taking your medications on schedule. Just because you are on vacation does not mean your allergies take a break. In fact, traveling may mean you are exposed to different (and more) triggers than normal. If possible, talk to your allergist before traveling to decide if any short-term adjustments are needed.

**K**eeep your allergist's phone number or other emergency contact information on-hand. Locate an allergist or medical center in the area you are visiting in case you need an urgent appointment. Call ahead to verify they accept your insurance. Allergy and asthma problems may occur over the holidays. Be prepared to limit the impact they have on your celebrations.

*Andrew W. Murphy, MD, FAAAAI, is an allergist/immunologist based in Downingtown, PA.*

## THINK TWICE ABOUT ALLERGIES BEFORE TOASTING

By Neil L. Kao, MD, FAAAAI

Is there such a thing as an alcohol allergy? Not exactly. But for some, certain alcoholic beverages can steal the sparkle from New Year's Eve festivities.



While no one is allergic to alcohol itself, ingredients and additives in some beverages may cause reactions. Wine (including champagne) is the most common culprit. One in 100 adults is sensitive to sulfites, preservatives used in wine. People with asthma are at greater risk — up to 5 percent have serious reactions to sulfites.

Though less common, some people also have allergic reactions to barley, wheat or rye used to make beer.

An allergic reaction often occurs within minutes to hours after drinking. Symptoms include itching around and inside of the mouth; swelling of the lips, tongue or throat; difficulty breathing; skin rashes; and lightheadedness.

Remember that alcoholic beverages may also be used in cooking and baking. Your allergist can help you determine if these foods are also a risk.

Of course, there are many other health risks associated with consuming alcohol. Even if you aren't allergic, always imbibe with caution.

*Neil L. Kao, MD, FAAAAI, is an allergist/immunologist based in Greenville, SC.*

## THE ART OF GIVING

By Andy Nish, MD, FAAAAI

Finding the perfect holiday gift is a difficult endeavor, but you must be even more selective when buying for friends and family with allergies and asthma. Use these tips for choosing gifts that will be treasured, not threats:

### NAUGHTY

- 📦 Stuffed animals, unless they are designated hypoallergenic
- 📦 Furry animals, such as dogs or cats
- 📦 Candy, baked goods or other food, unless you are certain it is food allergy safe
- 📦 Candles, perfumes and other scented products
- 📦 Wool, angora or cashmere for those with eczema or other sensitive skin conditions

### NICE

- 📦 Hypoallergenic toys for children
- 📦 Pets such as fish or reptiles which tend not to be associated with allergies
- 📦 Mattress covers, air purifiers or other allergy reducers
- 📦 Membership or donation to a non-profit awareness/advocacy organization

When in doubt, ask the recipient (or his parents) for ideas. He will know what gifts are appropriate and will appreciate your concern for his health. Gift cards are also a safe option in nearly every situation.

*Andy Nish, MD, FAAAAI is an allergist/immunologist based in Gainesville, GA*



## YOU DESERVE EXPERT CARE

An allergist is a pediatrician or internist with an **extra two years** of specialized training and is the best physician to diagnose and treat allergies and asthma

Find one near you at [www.aaaai.org/physref](http://www.aaaai.org/physref)

## About ISSUES

*Allergy & Asthma Issues* is a free quarterly publication from the American Academy of Allergy, Asthma & Immunology. To receive a PDF copy of *Issues* by e-mail, please e-mail [media@aaaai.org](mailto:media@aaaai.org).

*Issues* is written and reviewed by medical professionals, but is not intended to replace or constitute medical advice. For specific medical questions, visit an allergist/immunologist. Locate one near you at [www.aaaai.org/physref](http://www.aaaai.org/physref).

For additional patient information on allergies and asthma, visit [www.aaaai.org](http://www.aaaai.org).

Edited by Kimberly Jahnke.

The American Academy of Allergy, Asthma & Immunology represents allergists, asthma specialists, clinical immunologists, allied health professionals and others with a special interest in the research and treatment of allergic disease. Established in 1943, the AAAAI has nearly 6,500 members in the United States, Canada and 60 other countries.

# RESOLVE TO CONTROL ASTHMA FIRST, THEN FOCUS ON WEIGHT LOSS

By Gary J. Stadtmauer, MD, FAAAAI, and Y. Claire Wang, MD, ScD

Each New Year, millions of Americans commit to lose weight. But for many, asthma may stand in the way of reaching their goals.

Obesity is a growing epidemic in the United States, with as many as 30 percent of adults and 15 percent of children considered obese. Millions more are overweight.

For a person with asthma, losing weight has extra challenges. When asthma acts up, you can't exercise. But even when asthma is under control, you may feel short of breath minutes into a workout. That's because the excess weight you carry compresses your lungs, limiting how much air you can breathe in and narrowing your airways.

Obese asthma patients tend to have more severe asthma and are more likely to be hospitalized. Research suggests that this increased severity is due to greater airway

inflammation and reduced effects of asthma medications in obese patients.

Obesity also increases the risk for sleep apnea, which leads to daytime fatigue and inactivity, further challenging efforts to lose weight. Sleep apnea also provokes inflammation and irritability in the bronchial tubes — leading to increased asthma symptoms. More research is needed, but there appears to be a vicious cycle between asthma, obesity and sleep apnea.

Exercise is an important part of any weight loss program, but if asthma is not well controlled it is impossible to work out to your full potential. If you are obese, then not only can proper asthma management help you with weight control but weight loss can in turn improve your asthma.

*Gary J. Stadtmauer, MD, FAAAAI, is an allergist/immunologist based in New York City.*

## A DANGEROUS RELATIONSHIP

The link between asthma and obesity



Asthma can prevent you from exercising, leading to weight gain. Overweight and obese patients, in turn, tend to have more severe asthma.

If you have asthma and would like to lose weight, consult with your allergist to develop an asthma treatment plan and exercise regimen that will work for you. Visit the AAAAI Physician Referral Directory at [www.aaaai.org](http://www.aaaai.org) to find an allergist near you.

To read summaries of the latest research in allergies and asthma, visit [www.aaaai.org/patients](http://www.aaaai.org/patients) and click on "Research for Patients." Scientific studies from the *Journal of Allergy and Clinical Immunology* are updated monthly.

## ALLERGIES LURK YEAR 'ROUND

Allergies are typically associated with pollen and the outdoors. But as cold temperatures drive us indoors each winter, millions of Americans find they are allergic to conditions inside their own homes. Indoor allergies can provoke sneezing, a runny nose, and itchy watery eyes.

Common indoor allergy triggers include dust mites, animal dander, molds and cockroach droppings. Keep allergens at bay with these tips from the American Academy of Allergy, Asthma & Immunology:

- Cover mattresses and pillowcases with allergy-proof covers
- Wash bedding weekly in hot water
- When possible, replace carpeting with hardwood, tile or linoleum flooring
- Dust and vacuum regularly (be sure vacuums are equipped with a HEPA filter)

- Keep cats and dogs out of the bedroom
- Keep humidity levels low to control dust mites and mold
- Use a solution of bleach and water to clean mold from basements and bathrooms
- Seal cracks in walls, doors and other places cockroaches may enter the home
- Keep food stored in airtight containers
- Clean up food messes and wash dishes immediately after use

For more information on indoor allergies, visit the Patients & Consumers section of [www.aaaai.org](http://www.aaaai.org).



## ALLERGY RISKS IN A HEART-SHAPED BOX

By Michael Pistiner, MD

Each Valentine's Day, millions of Americans have more than *amour* on their mind. They worry about allergic reactions to candies, flowers and other traditional gifts.

Adults and children alike may be tempted to forgo their typical avoidance strategies to appear polite and grateful on this day of love – a move that could have serious consequences. Keep your Valentine's Day sweet with these tips:

### FOOD ALLERGIES

Avoid eating foods that are not packaged and/or foods that do not have a label. Desserts and chocolates are notorious for having hidden ingredients (especially peanuts and tree nuts) and home cooks may not understand the risks of cross-contamination. Be wary of mini candies, which may be processed in different facilities and with different ingredients than larger versions.

Help children celebrate the holiday safely by contacting teachers to review classroom policies prior to parties. Send allergy-safe packaged treats for your child to enjoy, if necessary. Empower and prepare children to advocate for themselves — practice saying “no thank you” and have open discussions about challenges that children may encounter on Valentine's Day.

Allergens can also be transferred through saliva, so consider what your significant other ate prior to puckering up. Studies have shown that soon after eating peanut butter, salivary levels of peanut protein were

high enough in some to cause a reaction. You should also avoid sharing utensils or drinkware, which may contain traces of tainted saliva.

### ASTHMA, HAY FEVER AND SKIN ALLERGIES

Perfume, flowers and jewelry are other popular gifts on Valentine's Day, but these, too, can be unwelcome.

While the pollens from brightly colored flowers like tulips and roses are heavy and typically do not cause allergy symptoms, their strong odors can trigger a person's asthma symptoms or non-allergic rhinitis. The same goes for perfumes, colognes and scented candles.

Prevent reactions by ensuring that nasal symptoms and asthma are under good control. Make sure to bring rescue medication to areas of possible exposure and try to avoid being in enclosed spaces with known triggers.

Jewelry containing nickel can cause itchy rashes in sensitive individuals. Remind loved ones of your allergy and request metals that are completely nickel-free, as even trace amounts can trigger a reaction.

*Michael Pistiner, MD, is an allergist/immunologist based in Nyack, NY.*



### *Immunotherapy, continued from cover*

The first step for treating allergies is determining the cause of your symptoms.

An allergist will use skin testing, a painless and accurate procedure, to identify allergy triggers. Results are generally available within 15 or 20 minutes.

Allergy shots expose a patient to tiny amounts of allergens over a long period of time, decreasing the body's overreaction to allergy triggers. The serum provided in the shots is custom mixed for each patient to treat specific allergy triggers.

Patients receiving allergy shots visit their allergist twice a week for short appointments — about 30 minutes. The shots are administered in increasing doses until a 'maintenance dose' is reached.

At this level, after a few months, patients should notice an improvement in symptoms and may be able to reduce their medications. The maintenance dose is continued for about three to five years. At the completion of immunotherapy, many patients no longer experience allergic reactions.

An allergist is a specialist at diagnosing and treating allergies and has specialized training, experience and knowledge in providing allergy shots. If spring makes you miserable, stop suffering. Visit an allergist — you can find one near you at [www.aaaai.org](http://www.aaaai.org).

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## DO YOU SUFFER FROM SEASONAL ALLERGIES?

Check local pollen and mold spore counts before you leave the house.

Visit the AAAAI's National Allergy Bureau at [www.aaaai.org](http://www.aaaai.org).

