**Allergies and asthma**

As we transition into Spring allergy season (and I blow my nose for the 40th time today), I thought it might be good to discuss the relationship between allergies and asthma. Allergies are a common trigger for asthma symptoms. Many of these are termed “environmental allergens.” This article will focus on these today. Common allergens in this group that we think of include the following:

* Grasses
* Trees
* Pollens
* Pets (dogs, cats, etc.)
* Dust mites
* Bugs, especially cockroaches
* Molds

Some of these allergens are perennial, meaning they are present at all times of the year. These would include pets, dust mites, cockroaches, and molds. Some are considered seasonal, meaning they are only present at certain times of the year, particularly Spring and Autumn. These would include grasses, trees, and pollens.

It is often helpful to understand your specific allergies to optimize your asthma treatment. This is particularly important if you notice your asthma tends to worsen at certain times of the year. Also, if you notice that visiting certain places (such as grandma’s house, with her dog or cat) tends to worsen your asthma, it may be a good idea to pursue allergy testing. This can be done in two ways. These are blood testing and skin testing. Blood testing requires a lab to draw your blood from a vein. This can be ordered by your primary care physician. Skin testing, or prick testing, is done using small amounts of the allergen being put into your skin and then looking for a reaction. This is usually done in the office of an allergy specialist, but some primary care physicians perform these tests.

Once you know what your allergies are, you can take steps to limit your exposure to them. These would include the following:

* Covering mattresses, box springs, and pillows with allergy-proof covers.
* Washing bedding (sheets, blankets, pillowcases) weekly.
* Replacing old carpets in the home, especially in the bedrooms of those with asthma. Use of washable rugs is better. Tile, vinyl, and wood floors are better for asthma.
* Use of a HEPA filter in the home. Frequently changing furnace filters.
* Avoiding humidifiers in the home (dust mites and molds like humidity).
* Limiting contact with pets to which you are allergic.
* Keeping windows closed.
* Air conditioners are better than swamp coolers (less humidity).
* Keeping floors and cupboards clean of food debris (cuts down on cockroaches).
* Showering twice daily (decreases the allergens on your skin).

The Utah and Salt Lake County Health Departments have an Asthma Home visiting Program which is free to the public. They can come to your home to assess for any concerns related to environmental allergens. To access this program, contact them at the following numbers (ask for the **Utah Asthma Home Visiting Program**):

* Salt Lake County Health Department (385-468-3651)
* Utah County Health Department (801-851-7509)

There are several medications that can be used to treat allergies. These can be used at the same time as you take your asthma medicines. Some of them include:

* Saline nasal sprays—help to rinse allergens out of your nose
* Steroid nasal sprays (e.g., Flonase)—over the counter
* Oral antihistamines (e.g., Claritin, Zyrtec, Allegra)—over the counter
* Leukotriene receptor antagonists (e.g., Singulair)—requires a prescription
* Biologics (e.g., Xolair, Nucala)—requires a prescription. Usually prescribed by an Allergist.
* Allergen immunotherapy—can be done either oral or by injection “allergy shots”—usually done by an Allergist.

I have found that effectively treating allergies can be very helpful in controlling asthma symptoms. Your doctor(s) can help work out the best treatment plan for you.