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Parenting Children With Allergies

Tips for coping with the stress of your child's chronic allergies.

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WebMD Feature
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Andrea Deckard's oldest son, Thryceton, 9, has allergy-induced asthma and suffers the social consequences. He has several friends with animals that he can't visit because breathing in pet dander sets off a full-blown asthma attack.

"It's harder for him as he gets older because he wants to be with the other kids," says Deckard, of Monroe, Ohio. Thryceton also skips gym class or outside activities when the pollen is high, lunches at a separate "peanut-free" table at school, and can't visit any homes where there is a smoker.

Welcome to parenting children with allergies. It can be exhausting for mom and dad, too.

Why Children's Allergies Lead to Parents' Stress

One in four U.S. children suffers from allergies. If your child is one of them, you know the drill: They can feel run down, develop secondary sinus infections or asthma, and be cranky. Allergies can be downright miserable for everyone in the family.

You also know that allergies can complicate the simplest activities for your child -- from eating and attending school to slumber parties and playing outside. Between chauffeuring them to doctor visits, researching treatment options, planning around their allergies, and trying to create an allergy-proof home, parents can become overwhelmed and burned out.

You can change that, however, with some simple steps. By re-evaluating how you care for your allergic child -- from the medicines you give her to planning vacations -- and integrating some stress-relief activities into your routine, you can turn stress time into quality time for both of you.

Is Your Child Getting the Best Allergy Medicine?

The first step in your stress-busting plan may be to talk to your child's allergist about better symptom control.

"It depends on the type of allergy the child has, but the main thing about any allergy is to make sure that you identify what triggers the child's problems or symptoms and then once you figure that out, you can help them cope with the symptoms they have," says Stanley Fineman, MD, clinical associate professor of pediatrics at Emory University School of Medicine in Atlanta.

If you haven't tried any new allergy medications for a while, you may find that second-generation medications or immunotherapy -- a series of allergy shots -- can work wonders. In fact, immunotherapy is the closest thing to curing allergies.

"Allergy shots have been shown to help 85% of people who go on them," says Rachel Schreiber, MD, an allergist immunologist and co-founder of [mommydocs.com](#), a pediatric information site. "And in children,

they help not only allergies, but also asthma.” Allergy shots can prevent the progression of allergies to asthma.

Immunotherapy is usually best suited for kids who can't take medications or whose medications aren't working well. Here's how it works: The doctor tests your child to find out which allergens cause a reaction. Then, over a period of months, a small bit of allergen is injected into the child (in the upper arm). Shots are given each week in the beginning and then every few weeks until the child is desensitized to the substance. The needle is small and kids usually tolerate the shots well.

Children's Allergies: 10 Tips for Less Stress

Next, try these strategies to keep allergies from taking over both of your lives.

- **Vacations.** Plan vacations during non-allergy seasons. If spring and summer are rough on your child's allergies, take a winter ski trip or a fall camping trip instead.
- **Summer Camps.** Explore alternative camps if traditional outdoor summer camps pose problems. How about art, computer, or surf camp?
- **Pets.** Unfortunately, there is no such thing as a truly hypoallergenic animal (sorry, President Obama!), but a few dog and cat breeds shed less or not at all, so some kids won't be bothered as severely. If you already have a pet, giving it up may cause more stress for your child than occasional allergy symptoms. In that case, keep dander down with frequent combings and baths, away from your child (and preferably outside). If you have to give up a pet due to your child's allergies, check with aunts, uncles, grandparents to see if they'll step in. That way you can still visit and keep the pet "in the family."
- **Sleepovers.** Encourage your child to invite friends to sleep over and visit your home for play dates if she has trouble visiting friends with pets.
- **Outdoor Outings.** If outdoor activities such as a picnic in the park cause allergy flare-ups, head to the ocean or a lake instead, which are often void of bothersome pollen and grasses.
- **Outdoor Sports.** When outdoor field sports such as lacrosse or soccer set off allergies or asthma, look into martial arts, dance, or swim teams.
- **Indoor Outings.** Visit library story hours, children's museums, and indoor playgrounds if you need an activity when the pollen count is high.
- **Outdoor Play.** Limit your allergic child's outside play to between 5 and 10 a.m., when pollen counts are highest.
- **Washing Up.** Get your child in the habit of showering or bathing and washing her hair every evening to wash off microscopic particles of pollens and grasses.
- **Take a break from allergies.** Incorporate fun time for you and your child into your routine. This can be as simple as playing board games (or blowing off steam with a whipped cream fight) or as big as spending a week together at a sleep-away space camp. It's easy for parents to become immersed in allergy lingo and treatment options, but it can become all you talk about with your child. Make sure you connect around other issues, like school, sports, or *American Idol!*

Coping With Children's Allergies: Stress Busters for Parents

Taking steps to make your child less miserable will certainly make you less miserable too. But it's easy to forget your own needs in the process. Try these tips for improving your quality of life.

- **Don't turn down adult social activities because of the kid's allergies.** Make arrangements for a babysitter or come up with an alternative plan.
- **Be flexible.** You never know when you'll have to move the picnic indoors or leave the park early. Staying open to alternatives and keeping your sense of humor will help you cope better.
- **Don't use your child's allergy as an excuse.** Don't say, "We can't go camping because Johnny has allergies" or "We can't have a pet because of Suzie's sinuses." That creates resentments between parents and children.

- **Don't skip the activities you enjoy.** If there's something you miss – such as visiting a public garden or hiking -- because you can't bring along allergy-prone kids, schedule it for date night or an outing with friends.
- **Schedule in "me time."** Everybody needs it. Decompress weekly with solo stress reducers like a manicure, massage, walk in the park, or coffee at a bookstore.

Creating a more relaxed family life when your child has allergies takes time and forethought at first, but eventually it becomes second nature. To avoid burn out and keep you and your child from being held hostage to allergies, adopt routines that easily become the norm for your family.

SOURCES:

American College of Allergy, Asthma & Immunology.

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