

Listen to a radio interviewer (R) talking to Dr Michael Peterson (Dr) about the rise in the number of people suffering from allergies.

Optional exercise (The answers are at the bottom of the page).

Decide whether these statements are TRUE or FALSE according to the listening.

1. Experts agree that there is an increase in all kinds of allergies
 2. Breast feeding can cause an allergy
 3. Too much cleanliness can have a negative effect on our children
 4. Some allergies have been proven to be genetic
 5. There is an increase in intolerance to certain foods
 6. Eating less processed food could help us avoid developing an allergy
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R: Dr Peterson. You've just published an article about allergies and the fact that they're on the rise.

Dr: Yes, that's right.

R: So. First of all, what kind of allergies are we talking about? Hayfever? Asthma?

Dr: All allergies really. An allergy is a physical reaction to a substance. That reaction can be sneezing, an itching, sore eyes, feeling sick, a rash of some kind – like eczema – or breathing difficulties – like asthma.

R: And are allergies on the rise?

Dr: Oh yes. Absolutely. There's no doubt about that. When I was at school there was only one boy in the class who had an inhaler. Now – thirty years later – more than half the kids in my daughter's class have them.

R: So, why the great increase? Is it our fault?

Dr: Sometimes, yes. Either directly or indirectly. Our lifestyles have changed a lot, starting from birth. It's a well known fact that bottle-fed babies are more likely to develop allergies than breastfed babies – yet fewer mothers breastfeed because they simply don't have the time or because of practicalities – like wanting to share the feeding with a partner. Then – when our children are toddlers we smother everything in disinfectant and destroy all traces of germs.

R: But surely that's a good thing?

Dr: No, it's not. Germs are good. Too much cleanliness is bad. Think back to when we were children. We used to make mud pies, splash about in dirty puddles, put all sorts of things into our mouths ...

R: So are you saying we aren't allowing our children's immune systems to develop?

Dr: Yes, that's exactly what I'm saying. Our obsessions with cleanliness have gone too far. We need to expose our children to germs so that their defence mechanisms have a chance to develop and get stronger. If they aren't exposed there's a danger that they'll develop allergies and food intolerances later on.

R: What about genes? Aren't some allergies genetic?

Dr: Yes and no. (laughter)

Dr: The jury is still out on that one. Allergy problems do run in the family but we don't understand why. Scientists have identified cases in families where there's been some kind of genetic mutation which affects the immune system in some way. This might result in members of a family being more prone to allergies – but not necessarily the same allergies. So Dad might be allergic to milk products while one child gets hayfever and another develops an allergy to some sort of skin cream.

R: And this doesn't explain why there has been such an increase in allergies over the past ten years or so.

Dr: No. It doesn't.

R: So what has changed?

Dr: Lifestyles - in a nutshell: Mobile phone use, all technology really. Stress levels are considerably higher than they used to be. We're exposed to more chemicals and toxic substances: diesel fumes, pesticides. One type of allergy that has risen considerably is food intolerance. In some places an allergy to soya is very common. This is probably because soya is present in so many food products these days and our bodies haven't had time to adjust to this change. We don't eat in the same way as we used to. Seasonal food is a thing of the past. Now everything is available all year round.

R: So. To sum up? Why are allergies on the rise?

Dr: Well, if we're summing up I'll keep it brief. Too much bottle-feeding, an obsession with cleanliness, too few germs and too many convenience foods, too little fresh fruit and veg and an abuse of out-of-season food all-year-round, too many vaccinations and altogether far too much stress.

R: Dr. Peterson. Thank you very much for coming to the studio today. If viewers would like to read Dr. Peterson's report they can write in to ...

Answers: 1T, 2F, 3T, 4F, 5T, 6T

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