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THE DOCTOR IS IN: WHERE IS THE BEST PLACE TO LIVE IF YOU HAVE ASTHMA OR ALLERGIES?

Frequently, AAFA-TX receives some difficult patient questions. *Air It Out* asked **Dr. William Howland, MD**, Board certified in Internal Medicine & Allergy and Immunology, Allergy & Asthma Center of Austin, (512-345-7635) www.nosneezes.com for his insight into these questions.

* **AIO: Indoor and outdoor allergens** as well as medication compliance affects not only asthma symptoms and control but also the symptoms and control of allergic rhinitis and sinusitis. But how do **geographical factors impact** these diseases? Many people ask AAFA-TX the **best place to live** if they have respiratory illness. How does a humid or dry environment, or a heavily polluted environment or a thin atmosphere due to higher elevations affect those with respiratory diseases?

* **Dr. Howland: Weather, location and elevations affect** the environment which can have secondarily affects on the **respiratory tract**, affecting asthma and allergies. **Lower elevations** in metropolitan areas are associated with **higher** levels of **air pollution** and, depending on climate, **higher** levels of **vegetation**. Air pollution has a minor or major effect on allergies and asthma depending on the individual patient. There are **different types** of air quality (**AQ**) **problems** associated with **urban areas** including gases (sulfur dioxide, ozone, diesel exhaust fumes) and fine particulates (carbon particles, latex particles from tires, etc). In general, these act as **respiratory irritants** and may also **promote inflammation** in the respiratory tract. **Pollutants** can have greater effects for patients if their allergic/asthmatic problem is already active. In addition, increased levels of '**greenhouse gases**', particularly carbon dioxide, can **cause increased growth of plants** (plants absorb carbon dioxide as food). Consequently, *more pollution causes plants to grow larger and release more pollen resulting in more allergies*. And, as our climate grows warmer (**global warming**) plants are pollinating for longer periods each year resulting in more allergies, too. Air pollution creates a vicious cycle for respiratory problems.

* Certainly, **geographic locations and elevations affect respiratory illnesses**. Locations closer to **oceans** may be **better** for allergic people. Pollen counts may be relatively lower as breezes from the sea generally carry little or no pollen. However, coastal areas are often humid with an increased mold spore count, a problem for those with mold allergy, plus heavier rainfalls encourage plant growth on shore, yet generally, tropical plants aren't pollinated by the wind but by birds and butterflies. Land located near **lakes and rivers** has an increase in vegetation pollen near the water and is generally associated with higher humidity levels which also encourage mold growth.

* **Desert or arid (dry) climates** are generally **better for allergy sufferers** due to minimal vegetation and mold spores. Growing seasons in the desert are short except where there is heavy irrigation, too, which mean less pollen.

* **Higher elevations** have shorter growing seasons and less pollen too and dust mites can't survive at elevations above 5,000 feet. Many people find lower humidity and 'thinner' air at higher elevations is better for their respiratory symptoms but above 7,000 feet, many people experience shortness of breath associated with **less oxygen** in the air at elevations **over 5000 feet**. Most people adapt to this over several months; however, **some people develop altitude sickness** but it is rarely life threatening, just not pleasant. Symptoms include sinus headache, extreme fatigue, shortness of breath, lightheadedness, nausea, rapid and/or irregular heartbeat upon exertion. It is hard to predict where an individual patient will feel best. Physicians usually recommend a dryer climate, away from urban areas with air pollution. However, it is good advice to **try out an area in different seasons** to see if it 'agrees with your disease' before making a major move.

* **AIO:** AAFA-TX also recommends that when planning a vacation select a location where your allergens aren't active at the time you'll be there. In other words, if you have severe pollen allergies, don't go to the mountains in the springtime, opt for a beach trip instead or perhaps a ski trip. But before you can make any of these decisions, whether it is a short vacation or a major life move, first **identify your own individual allergens in order to eliminate or avoid them**. For more information on this topic, send a request to info@aafatexas.org

* Coming next issue: More from Dr. Howland who answers your questions on the relationship of GERD and asthma.

Upcoming Free AAFA-TX Programs: **1) April 17**, "Asthma & Allergy Essentials for Childcare Providers" Better Beginnings Children's Center, Houston, Sarah Nelson, Instructor **2) June 7** "Diagnosing & Managing Asthma 2008" La Quinta Inn, Arlington (across from Six Flags Center) an AMA accredited CME symposium worth 4 cat. 1 credits for physicians, nurse practitioners, physician assistants, nurses and respiratory therapists. (worth 4 CE for nurses, eligible for 4 AOA category 1B credits). Faculty: William Lumry, MD, William Neaville, MD, Robert Rogers, MD, Eric Schmitt, MD, Gerald Moore, MD, moderator. Rebecca Gruchalla, program director. Pre-registration required via email to info@aafatexas.org include full name, degrees, specialty, address, daytime phone, email. For more info, write info@aafatexas.org

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