When Bedbugs Bite

and Other Allergy and Asthma-Causing Drama

March 1, 2011 By Fern Gillespie

Sleep tight and don't let the bedbugs bite is no longer a benign nursery rhyme. Bedbugs have re-emerged as a 21st century menace. The night crawlers have crept into the category of insects that cause allergic reactions. A bedbug bite has been known to lead to scars, infections and, in some extreme circumstances, a life-threatening, whole-body allergic reaction called anaphylaxis.

Allergens—substances that can set off allergies—can lurk in countless materials, many of them obvious, but others seemingly benign and downright surprising: in cosmetics and jewelry, in chamomile tea, cell phones and sperm, even in activities such as body piercing, tattooing and kissing. As allergy season starts, *Real Health* looks at a few of the allergens people don't usually guard against.

BEDBUGS

Today, talk about these almost invisible insects has created a niche in the extermination industry. But definitive data about people with severe allergic reactions to bedbugs remain sparse. "We don't have any real data about that because people are embarrassed to talk about being bitten by bedbugs," explains allergist Richard D. deShazo, MD, of the University of Mississippi Medical Center in Jackson. "Most of the data we have comes from our own research."

Indeed, what is definitive, deShazo says, is the significant increase he's seen in the number of patients coming to see him because of allergic reactions to bedbug bites. Many of these patients, deShazo says, blame these allergic episodes on fleas, mosquitoes, mites and other insects because either they don't think it may be bedbug-related or they don't want to acknowledge the problem.

A well-known allergist who specializes in allergic reactions to insect bites, deShazo serves on a committee of the American College of Allergy, Asthma and Immunology (ACAAI) that studies the critters. He wrote an article about bedbugs and the consequences of being bitten by them that was published in the April 2009 issue of the *Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA)*.

According to deShazo, most people never know they're bitten because they're not allergic to bedbugs. But more people have allergic reactions to bedbug bites than to the stings of other insects, he explains. Those with bedbug allergies develop intense itching on localized areas. When they scratch these areas,

the skin may become infected and lead to scarring. And if there's a large enough infestation, scars can develop all over the body. In very rare cases, bedbugs bites have caused severe anaphylactic reactions, deShazo says.

According to deShazo, bedbug infestation is a worldwide epidemic that reflects the insects' resistance to the usual pesticides that hotels and motels use to dispatch them. Anyone who travels nowadays should check for bedbugs so they don't come back home with you, deShazo cautions. Why? "Because it's very difficult to get rid of them once an infestation occurs," he says.

Well, OK, but just how do you detect these creepy critters? Check for their droppings, which are often tinged with blood, deShazo advises. And carefully peel back mattress covers and check along the rim. In addition, scrutinize wall cracks and peeling paint that may hide bedbugs. Also take a close look at picture frames or cracks in wooden furniture, particularly antiques.

CELL PHONES

The boom in these communication devices is connected to an increase of related allergies. The culprit? Nickel, a common allergen that affects up to 17 percent of women and 3 percent of men, according to the ACAAI. While nickel is found in everyday objects such as keys, coins, paper clips, jewelry, watches and eyeglass frames, our contact with these items is generally brief. Not so with cell phones, which we constantly press against our faces, resulting in contact dermatitis. Symptoms of nickel allergy include dry, itchy patches on cheeks, jawlines and ears. Other signs include redness, swelling, itching, eczema, blistering, lesions and sometimes oozing and scarred skin.

These signs of contact dermatitis can result from exposure to even a small amount of the allergen being absorbed into the skin, explains Michael Foggs, MD, chief of Allergy, Asthma & Immunology for Advocate Medical Group & Advocate Health Care, a health care network in Chicago. (Foggs is considered one of the nation's leading experts on allergies and asthma among African Americans.)

TATTOOS

Allergies caused by body art are also skin deep. According to the ACAAI, 24 percent of people ages 18 to 50 sport tattoos. This creative outlet of self-expression puts wearers of body art at risk of allergic reactions from the pigments used to color tattoo dyes. "With tattoos, the [possibly offending] pigment is in your skin permanently, unless it's removed," Foggs says. "But in most cases you can remove all the pigment."

BODY PIERCING

No longer the exclusive domain of ears, piercings now grace the nose, lips, belly, eyebrow, tongue, nipples and other sensitive body parts, often showing off jewelry and other adornments. According to the ACAAI, 14 percent of people ages 18 to 50 have had body piercing done. And some have experienced nickel-caused allergic reactions from metal jewelry. "Allergists have one recommendation," Foggs stresses. "Remove the agent causing the contact dermatitis." In addition, some researchers suggest no

ear piercing for children until they are past age 10.

COSMETICS

For some people, an allergic reaction to cosmetics is a beauty backlash. Fragrances and preservatives contained in cosmetics can cause allergy symptoms, such as redness, itching, crusting, swelling, blistering, dryness, scaliness and thickening of the skin. Nearly 22 percent of everyone patch-tested for allergies reacts to chemicals in cosmetics, according to allergist Luz Fonacier, MD, an ACAAI fellow. The average person uses 12 personal products a day. Those 12 products may contain up to 168 chemicals, many of which can be irritants or cause allergies, Fonacier notes. Cosmetics culprits may be found in fragrances, foundations, mascara, eyeliner, nail polish and more. At his practice, Foggs has been noticing another issue too: “I’ve seen several patients during the past year where lip balm or lipstick contain agents that cause the skin to blister,” he says.

HERBS

Even these all-natural botanicals are not necessarily benign. Herbal teas can actually worsen some people’s allergies. “Certain natural substances can have side effects, just like medicines,” says allergist William Silvers, MD. Silvers specializes in allergy complementary medicine at the Allergy, Asthma and Immunology Clinic of Colorado. For example, he mentions chamomile tea. “People with ragweed and daisy allergies will get worse while drinking chamomile tea,” Silvers says, explaining that chamomile and ragweed are part of the same plant family.

WHAT’S THE CONNECTION BETWEEN ALLERGIES AND ASTHMA?

Experts are not sure what causes asthma—a chronic respiratory disease that makes breathing difficult. What they do know is that people who have allergies are at a much higher risk of developing asthma. Why? Because certain substances that trigger allergies, such as pollen, dust mites and pet dander, can also trigger an asthma attack.

Symptoms of allergic asthma attacks or allergy-induced asthma include shortness of breath, wheezing and chest tightness. And, remember those nasty bedbugs? Well, the insects can trigger an allergic asthma attack when their dried outer skins and feces become airborne and inhaled by susceptible people.

But in all these instances—whether the culprits are bedbugs or cell phones—the true cause of the allergy often goes undiagnosed.

What’s the best solution when you can’t figure out the source of the problem? Here’s deShazo’s advice: “If you have allergies or asthma and you don’t know the cause of your skin irritation, see your allergist.”

Only a doctor can confirm an allergic asthma diagnosis. The way it’s done is through a skin or blood test to see what your asthma triggers are.

Yes, asthma—from allergies or other triggers—is currently an incurable illness. But with proper management, people can still lead healthy and active lives.

If you or your child has been told you have asthma, or even if you have occasional problems taking a good, deep breath, click here, to take a test from the American College of Allergy, Asthma & Immunology (ACAAI) to determine your life quality or “LQ”.

© 2026 Smart + Strong All Rights Reserved.