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The Allergy and Obesity Link

America's obesity epidemic is causing allergy rates to rise. Learn about the latest research pointing to another reason to keep off excess pounds.

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Obesity has been categorized as an epidemic in the United States, one that has prompted numerous local and national efforts to promote healthier lifestyles. Heart disease, cancer, and diabetes are commonly cited as conditions for which people suffering from obesity are at increased risk. But now, new research is pointing to yet another reason for keeping off the weight, especially in children: Staying slim may help prevent **allergies**.

Obesity and Allergy in Children

Recent data gathered from the Centers for Disease Control's National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey indicates a link between allergy and obesity. Researchers looking at this data, which included responses from more than 4,000 children ages 2 to 19, compared immunoglobulin E (IgE) levels, an indicator of allergic activity in the body, with obesity levels. They found that children suffering from obesity had higher IgE levels. In fact, obese children were 26 percent more likely to have some form of allergy than children of normal weight.

These findings led the researchers to conclude that obesity may be a contributor to the rising number of American children with allergies, particularly **food allergies**, and that systemic inflammation, commonly experienced by overweight individuals (and sometimes measured by a lab test measuring a substance called C-reactive protein, or CRP) may also contribute to the development of these allergies.

Allergy and IgE

This recent research is not the first time IgE levels have been looked at in association with allergy and obesity. In 2007, the Allergy and Asthma Foundation of America initiated its "What's My IgE?" campaign, intended to raise awareness about IgE testing as a method of screening for allergic asthma.

"A high percentage of people who have asthma are allergic," says Beth Corn, MD, chief of the allergy asthma clinic at Mount Sinai School of Medicine in New York.

In fact, more than 2.5 million children under age 18 have **allergic asthma**, which is triggered by inhaled allergens like dust mites, pet dander, pollen, and mold. When exposed to these kinds of triggers, people who suffer from allergic asthma produce too much IgE.

Obesity and Allergy in Adults

Although a large number of people develop asthma in childhood, the number of adult-onset cases is also on the rise. Approximately 30 percent of adult-onset asthma cases are triggered by allergies, a statistic that may be tied to concurrently rising obesity rates.

Researchers in Finland looked into how lifestyle factors, including obesity, may be connected to adult-onset asthma. Their study followed more than 10,000 adult twins, free of asthma when the study started, for nine years. The researchers found that the adults who became obese link to had a higher rate of

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asthma than those who maintained normal weight. The study also showed that a lack of physical activity increased asthma risk.

Not only have researchers identified obesity as being associated with allergies and asthma, but the medical community also knows that being overweight can exacerbate these conditions. "Obesity is one of the worst things for allergic asthma because it makes breathing much more difficult," says Dr. Corn.

Allergy and Obesity: Connection Tested

The researchers who made the allergy-obesity connection by measuring IgE levels used a body mass index (BMI) scale for determining weight categories. In that study, published in the *Journal of Allergy and Clinical Immunology*, children whose BMI fell in or above the 95th percentile were considered obese.

Just one month after the release of those findings, the same journal published research that again linked allergy and obesity, but through a different system called "central obesity" — determined according to waist measurement and other factors. Despite this difference in method for determining unhealthy weight levels, researchers in the second study came to the same conclusion: Obesity levels are associated with allergic disease.

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