

# Allergies have emotional, psychological downside

The emotional and psychological effects of being an allergy sufferer can be debilitating, causing him or her to be shy, stressed, embarrassed, self-conscious and even socially isolated. This is according to a nationwide survey of learners aged between 10 and 18 who suffer from allergies. It also showed that most can 'cope' with the negative effects that allergies have on their school work and sports.

Pharma Dynamics commissioned the survey, which interviewed nearly 800 allergy sufferers at schools across South Africa, to understand the impact allergies have on children's education and ability to thrive in the school environment.

Another finding was that very few teachers knew what to do in the case of a severe allergic attack, putting children's lives at risk. A major allergic reaction - especially to food allergies, which are on the increase - can land a child in hospital and could be fatal.

## Results

Results indicated that approximately 30% suffered from sinus allergies, 31.7% from hay fever, 18.2% from asthma, 32.5% from eczema and 17.2% from food allergies, with some respondents suffering from multiple allergies. Less than a third has suffered from birth, with about 72% developing their allergy during early childhood. About 70% had missed school at some point because of their allergies. More than one in 10 said they could not concentrate on lessons because of their allergies.

"While a few respondents indicated that they had to miss exams or important sporting events because of severe allergic attacks, many described the emotional and psychological impact of their allergies on their mental health and social lives, an aspect that is often overlooked in allergy management," says Mariska Fouche, public affairs manager for Pharma Dynamics.

"They described feeling embarrassed and self-conscious when people stared at the eczema on their arms and legs; hating 'looking gross and pale' and 'not pretty'; and feeling frustrated and unhappy at not being able to be out on the school fields or with animals, like their friends. One girl wanted to give up netball because she didn't know how to react to people's comments while another described not being taken seriously and being told that she was 'pretending' about her allergy. Others told researchers that their allergies were stressful.

"It is important for young children and teenagers to fit in with their peers, and allergies can be a major stumbling block to their emotional and psychological well-being if they are not managed well."

## Coping tips

Fouche says that parents and teachers can help children cope with their allergies with the following tips:

- Visit a doctor to have a proper diagnosis via a blood test and get a prescription for appropriate allergy treatment. Many children reported that their medication made them "drowsy", "sleepy" or unable to concentrate; talk to your doctor or pharmacist about a the best possible medication for your child.
- Tell the school about your child's diagnosis, give them the name of the allergy medication they've been prescribed and your doctor's contact details.
- Consider a medical ID bracelet that details your child's allergies, especially if they suffer from severe attacks.
- Explain the condition to your child and their friends in simple terms so they understand what an allergy is and what to do in case of an attack. Visit [www.allergyexpert.co.za](http://www.allergyexpert.co.za) for more information.
- If your child suffers from food allergies, pack an appropriate lunch or visit the school tuck shop with them to discuss healthy choices.
- Reassure your child that he or she can tell you if they are being teased, picked on or bullied about their allergies. Discuss the effects that an allergy has on their life and ways that he or she can manage it better.
- Take your child seriously when they say their allergies are acting up. It is important for their stress levels and emotional wellbeing that they feel like they are being taken seriously.

### **Celebs in common**

Those who have allergies do not have to feel alone. Here is a list of movie, sports and television stars that suffer from various allergies:

- Nasal allergies and hay fever - Kelly Osborne, Lady Gaga, Katy Perry
- Eczema - Kate Middleton, Nicole Kidman, Brad Pitt
- Food allergies - Serena Williams, Victoria Beckham, Halle Berry, Orlando Bloom
- Asthma - Pink, Lindsay Lohan, Jessica Alba

For more information, go to [www.allergyexpert.co.za](http://www.allergyexpert.co.za).

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