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Top Docs: Q&A

A Nose for Allergies

Q&A with a Top Doc: Robert Call, Richmond Allergy & Asthma Specialists

Even though he grew up in Richmond, a top-10 city for spring allergies according to the Asthma and Allergy Foundation of America, Dr. Robert Call wasn't an allergy sufferer himself until his early 40s, when he developed mild nasal allergies. He actually became interested in the specialty during his residency in internal medicine.

"It's like being Sherlock Holmes," Call says. "I'm always trying to sort out a cause, solve a mystery."

Are there more people suffering from allergies today, or are doctors simply better at diagnosing them?

We think there are more people with allergies. If you are an allergic person, you tend to get allergic to what you are exposed to. There are theories like the hygiene hypothesis: We live such clean lives that our infection-fighting defenses don't have anything to do, so the immune system attacks allergens. I have a theory that one allergic parent could have children that are allergic -- genetics.

Are children who grow up with animals less likely to develop allergies?

There is data to suggest that kids growing up with a cat in the house are less likely to be cat-allergic. But that doesn't hold true for other allergens.

If you are allergic to dust mites, how often do you need to clean house?

You should use a vacuum with a HEPA filter and vacuum at least once a week. Wash your bed linens weekly in hot water and bleach. As far as dust, the less the better. ... It's been suggested that you vacuum your mattress every six months.

Can you outgrow allergies or develop allergies as you get older?

Yes, allergies can go into prolonged remission. You can become allergic at any age. --By Joan Tuppe

A to Zzzs

Q&A with a Top Doc: Rakesh Sood, Professor of Psychiatry and Director of the VCU Sleep Disorder Clinic

The medical field was a natural profession for Dr. Rakesh Sood.

"My father was an ophthalmologist," he explains. "There are more than 15 physicians in my immediate family."

According to Sood, sleep problems affect more than 20 percent of the U.S. population. "Yet many physicians are not

trained in detecting sleep disorders," he observes. "This offers me the unique opportunity to help treat some serious sleep disorders."

Is there anything nonsurgically that you can do to alleviate snoring?

Snoring can be reduced by losing weight and by not drinking alcohol within three hours of bedtime. It can also be reduced by treating any obstructions that narrow the air passages and by being physically active. [Breathing] strips may or may not work depending on the obstruction in the nose. We do not recommend them unless there is a superficial blockage.

Is there any ideal way to sleep -- stomach, back, side?

No. Conditions like sleep apnea do tend to get worse when you sleep on your back.

Are there windows of opportunity for falling asleep?

Yes. They are between 9 and 11 p.m. and during the daytime after lunch between 1 and 3 p.m. If you don't go to bed at those times, it may be more difficult to fall asleep. The most important thing is your sleep/wake cycle and other physiological circadian rhythms such as body temperature, steroid secretion, growth-hormone production, et cetera. There is no sleep switch that you can turn on and off. -- *JT*

Skin Akin to a Window

Q&A with a Top Doc: Georgia K. Seely, Dermatology Associates of Virginia

Dr. Georgia Seely was in her third year of medical school when she sat through a lecture series on dermatology. Other lectures sometimes bored her.

"I didn't fall asleep in these," she says with a laugh. It caused her to consider dermatology as a career. "I fell in love with it. The skin is a window to the inside."

Should you wash your face every day and can you wash it with soap?

Yes. Your face gets dirty like the rest of your body. For example, if you have dry skin, you might want to use a product for dry skin, a non-soap cleanser. ... In general, Dove soap is a good product that most people can use well.

What should you look for when buying sunscreens?

You want a broad-spectrum sunscreen. UVB rays burn you. UVA rays do chronic sun damage. Sunscreens are all good today as compared to the past. You want to make sure you have UVB and UVA protection. If you have sensitive skin, look for products with titanium oxide or zinc oxide. Those two blockers, along with parsol, are the three best. The best sunscreen for a woman's face is Neutrogena Ultra-Sheer. It dries like a powder. It's non-greasy.

Is there any type of diet or exercise that will help with wrinkles?

Ninety percent of wrinkles come from the sun. Most people do sun damage before the age of 20, and you can't undo what you have done. ... A lot of lines are caused by expression. -- *JT*

Hear Ye, Hear Ye

Q&A with a Top Doc: Robert J. Brager, Virginia Ear, Nose & Throat Associates, P.C.

Ten years after a mentor from Georgetown University Medical Center led him to his first post-residency job, Dr.

Robert J. Brager is still with the same Richmond partnership. The father of three daughters with his wife, Sharon, he focuses primarily on pediatrics but also sees adults. In fact, physicians often refer returning vacationers with scuba-diving-related eardrum damage to Brager because he's a diver himself.

Is there a safe way to use cotton swabs to clean your ears?

No. The people who invented cotton swabs never meant for you to put them in the ear canal. The ear canal is self-cleaning, and when you put the cotton swabs in, you push in two-thirds more material than you get out.

Do you recommend a particular style or brand of headphone in order to minimize hearing damage?

None of them are actually good, so if you're going to use them, you have to maintain a lower volume. I like to tell people that if you're listening to your MP3 player and you can't communicate at all with someone, that's too loud.

What should you do if you have trouble clearing your ears on an airplane?

Prevent that problem by decongesting your nose with decongestants or saltwater sprays and drinking -- I don't mean an extra cocktail on the plane. Good water drinkers will have a better time of clearing. You can chew gum, try to yawn, but if you do the Valsalva maneuver -- hold your nose and blow, mouth closed -- you can damage your eardrums. Remember, unless you're in terrible pain, it will clear on its own eventually. --*Ashley Tate Townsend*

Bladder Banter

Q&A with a Top Doc: Anthony M. Sliwinski, Virginia Urology Center

As a child, Dr. Anthony Sliwinski looked up to his father, who was a rheumatologist.

"My first Halloween costume when I was about 5 years old was my dad's medical bag, stethoscope and white coat," he recalls.

Sliwinski says that being a urologist offers him an opportunity to cultivate long-term relationships with his patients. "I like that."

What color should a person's urine be and why?

Urine should be a light yellow, the color of straw. That's the perfect color and concentration. When it's dark yellow, it's too concentrated -- it has too many waste products. You are not drinking enough water. The old recommendation of eight glasses of water a day is around the right amount.

What's the best beverage you can drink for urinary health?

Boring water. Water is best, then juices, then sodas without caffeine, then coffee without caffeine.

Is there any way you can prevent urinary incontinence?

Yes. There is good evidence that you should stay in good shape and don't get overweight. Avoid bladder stimulants such as caffeine. Some foods and drinks lend themselves to an urgency to urinate. Examples are tea, chocolate and highly acidic foods and juices such as cranberry juice -- it's good for infections but is a stimulant. Weight is important in females. After childbirth, a woman should rehabilitate the pelvic muscles by doing Kegel exercises.

Are there any herbal supplements that work to promote prostate health?

Saw palmetto is the most commonly used herbal remedy for the prostate. Selenium and lycopene and maybe a little zinc are also good for prostate health. -- *JT*