



# A Season of Happiness

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HL20

## Allergies

### They seem to be on the increase, but why?

Some of our older generation will claim allergies to be a modern-day phobia that were never an issue in their day. Despite knowing this isn't true, I have to admit that people seem to suffer more now than they ever did in the past, and I wonder why that is. Are we growing less resilient, softer in fact; or is it that we are being subjected to an excess of alien substances which our bodies fail to handle? During the Roman occupation of Britain, newly arrived soldiers had a similar problem. Having been brought up on grains and fruit, many suffered an allergic reaction to meat which was the only food their foragers managed to scrounge because the Brits had destroyed everything else. Presumably the majority got used to it, but I daresay the odd one who never did was stuck with an upset stomach for the remainder of his tour of duty until he could return home to resume his old diet. Unfortunately, it isn't always that easy because first-time exposure to an alien element that results in a bad reaction can change a person's tolerance not only to the ingredient in question, but also to other seemingly unrelated substances, sometimes forever.

Take the case of my father. He loved cooked crab-meat which he ate frequently without a problem; but after being stung by a jellyfish, just a trace of any shellfish would cause him to blow up like a balloon. Something had apparently changed in his digestive system or metabolism. I gather he was not unique in this respect, because I have heard of people having similar experiences requiring them to be cautious of what they eat or touch in future. Many more, however, who don't have such a drastic reaction, still suffer when exposed to particular substances that their system rejects, on occasions most severely. The rest of us are lucky in having a constitution that copes well in most instances, and the times it doesn't we shrug off the discomfort in the knowledge that it will probably be short-lived. I guess what I am saying is that everyone is allergic to something and past generations would have been no different.

I imagine even a Troglodyte blundering into a clump of poison ivy would have suffered in the same way as modern man; but he would simply have taken the consequences as just another downside of a cruel life and moved on. Later, in civilised times but before medicine was a real science, anyone afflicted by a mysterious illness might have visited the local crone for a charm or potion to fix the curse that had presumably been visited on them. I don't doubt that occasionally the dubious cure worked, the herbs and elements employed in those times being the basis of today's drugs and medicines; but I also imagine there would have been a pretty high failure rate. The one thing favouring a patient's eventual recovery was probably less to do with evil-smelling concoctions than it was the life they were forced to lead. Disease was rife, sanitation non-existent, and good health was thought to be enhanced by washing as infrequently as possible and wearing the same clothes for six months. Food would have been relatively simple and generally the same for every meal, depending on availability. When it started to run short, they just ate less and still survived – well, most of them. There'd have been a few who wouldn't make it to the next harvest, but the rest, by frequent exposure to the causes, had probably developed immunity to many ailments that would have seen us running to the doctor every five minutes. As for allergies – the word hadn't been invented yet.

Essentially, the only difference between then and now, at least with respect to food, would seem to be quantity and quality. Even early in the twentieth century when lifestyles had improved considerably, along with the preparation and choice of meals that people ate, only the rich could afford refrigeration, so the ingredients used had to be fresh. As for preservatives, they were very basic – salt, vinegar, oils and sugar, natural substances that everyone was used to and able to tolerate. Boring though it might have been, locals tended to stick with the diet they had been brought up on. But as populations increased, there was a need not only to increase food production, but also to find better ways to store any surplus. The introduction of chemicals seemed to be the answer, perhaps at the expense of taste which was eventually offset by extra substances that were added to improve flavour and colour. Before long people were eating much more than just plain food, being forced to ingest all manner of supplementary ingredients, so many that they are more conveniently known by number than their actual name.

These additives have been a bone of contention since their introduction, more so in recent times. It is claimed that they are not only responsible for digestive problems, but also behavioural changes, especially in young children. When unknown ingredients, even in small doses, have kids bouncing off the walls, one

has to wonder what they might do to adults who are, after all, just bigger versions of the same creatures. Could it be that these artificial colours and flavourings change more than just the taste and look of the food we eat? Might they not cause our system to reject or rebel not only against the culprits in question, but also the foodstuff that they are supposed to enhance? Trying to avoid these is probably advisable, yet almost impossible in the present climate.

The answer would seem to be a return to fresh food rather than the processed kind. Home-made meals, cakes, bread, etcetera ought to ensure the absence of alien substances in our food because we know what goes into the making of it – ordinary vegetables, flour, eggs, meat from the butcher, straight butter as opposed to blended spreads; everything, in fact, direct from the farm with no interference. Unfortunately, unless we can raise our own crops and livestock in a relatively organic way, we still have no idea what we are eating. Is plain flour truly plain; and does it come from the same type of crop that kept our grandparents healthy till a ripe old age; or has that original quality been cross-pollinated or genetically modified out of it? In Australia, until a few years ago, suppliers added something to meat which kept it looking red and fresh. That practice has now been banned, officially anyway. They are still, however, permitted to inject water into meat – they claim it is to retain the moisture content; it also adds to the weight, of course - but is water the only addition? Crops are sprayed to prevent disease and insect damage, not to mention the chemical fertilizers used. Are any or all of these contaminating our food, causing the modern-day allergies many of us seem to suffer from? I have no idea, and I doubt anyone else really does.

Neither have I come up with a solution, I'm sorry to say. As I see it, the best we can do is stay away from whatever seems to be affecting our health, even in minor ways. If the pollution in the area we live is making us sick, the obvious thing to do is move, if at all possible. The same applies to places of work which may be unhealthy in themselves, or bringing us into contact with substances that react badly with us. If we can stop eating junk food, we'll all be better off. As for those pre-prepared, ready-to-cook meats, patties, schnitzels, TV dinners and weight-watchers meals, they are very likely to contain a few numbered additives that may spark more than a mild bout of indigestion. Whenever practical, forget those time-saver dishes from the supermarket and make your own. Wash the fruit and vegetables before use to get rid of any residual chemicals, and peel the outside skins of potatoes, apples, etc. Nutritionists may claim that this is the best part, but with respect to allergens, it could also be the worst.

I do believe that, in respect to general health, progress hasn't served us as well as might have been expected. We may live longer, but we do seem to suffer more because there is more to incite the suffering. It should also be remembered that natural immunity to certain ailments is often acquired by exposure to the instigator. In comparison to olden times, modern homes can be too clean, super-sterile, in fact, so contact with bacteria and the like is less frequent. Then, on the odd occasion it does happen, our bodies are totally unprepared and fail to cope well. We can't go back to "The Good Old Days" and that probably wouldn't suit most of us anyway. There were certainly less options then. We love the variety we enjoy from foreign dishes, exotic spices and produce from all over the world. We just have to be aware that some of them are making us unhealthy. Each of us has to figure out which ones they are and stay off them. And if that means no more diet soda and flavoured rice crackers, so be it!

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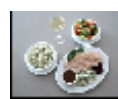
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