

Welcoming and Supporting Those with Allergies, Asthma

Congregations across the ELCA are implementing innovative ways to create a climate that is welcoming and inclusive. Unfortunately, the church lags behind other institutions in an increasing consciousness about environmental health, especially as it affects those with allergies and asthma. We expect safe, health-wise schools, workplaces, smoke-free restaurants, and we are intentional about ensuring our homes provide a healthy environment. How is it that we often overlook the church's responsibility for our physical well-being?

More than 50 million Americans live with allergic disease and nearly 18 million have asthma. Indoor air pollution is cited as one of the top five human health hazards in our country. For those who suffer with allergies and asthma, exposure to triggers can cause adverse responses such as sneezing, coughing, breathing difficulties, nausea, headaches and even life-threatening anaphylaxis reactions. For some, coming to church is a health hazard.

Approximately 15 percent of the population is affected by multiple chemical sensitivity (MCS), an adverse reaction to fragrances and other toxic chemicals in the environment at levels that have been generally accepted as non-toxic. In addition to the above symptoms, people with MCS may experience short or long-term memory loss, exhaustion, depression, learning disabilities (in children), skin irritations, and a host of other reactions.

Common Triggers

Foods: eight foods are responsible for up to 90 percent of all food allergies: milk, eggs, peanuts, soy, wheat, tree nuts, fish, and shellfish.

Chemicals: found in fragrances, cleaning materials, disinfectants, paints, latex, and office supplies.

Airborne contaminants: mold, dust, and pollen are the most common culprits.

Animals and Insects: pets, bees, wasps, fire ants and cockroach allergens.

It is difficult to fully understand the complex nature of allergies, asthma, and the varied ways they are manifested in each person, but through education and awareness-building, and with intentional changes to practices and procedures, the church can take steps to reduce barriers that prevent members and visitors from full participation in the life of the church.

How You Can Help

- Urge parents and leaders to provide snacks without nuts and nut oils (such as almond extract) or to mark baked goods containing these items.
- Make it known that non-wheat or gluten-free bread is also available for communion.
- Use the bulletin or newsletter to invite worshippers to avoid the use of perfume or after-shave. Consider adopting a "scent-free" policy.
- If incense or scented candles are to be used, give advance notice.
- Liability issues are prompting many congregations to remove medications and epi-pens from first aid kits. Instead, train leaders to recognize symptoms and warning signs of asthma attacks or allergic reactions. A call to 911 is the preferred response.
- Invite a parish nurse or health care professional to meet with committees and other leaders to address a holistic approach to maintaining a healthy environment at church. Include leaders for worship, Christian education, the early-childhood center, office personnel, building maintenance staff and volunteers.
- May is National Allergy/Asthma awareness month. Use this opportunity to inform, educate, and adopt new practices.
- Building maintenance is critical in combating mold. Keep the roof leak-free, control humidity, and seal areas prone to moisture.

- Be aware that ceiling fans wreak havoc as dust and carpet fibers are stirred up.
- Schedule heavy maintenance such as painting, carpet cleaning or wax-stripping at a time when a significant “airing-out” period is afforded.

Resources

- *Ministry to the Environmentally Ill: The Cindy Duehring Story*. A video available from the Eastern Resource Center, e-mail julie.aageson@ecunet.org
- The spring issue of the *TALK* resource (www.augsburgfortress.org/store) includes a letter from a parent regarding a peanut allergy.
- See “Colognes, Chemicals, Compassion and the Church” at www.ucg.org/un/un0201/cologne.html
- The Food Allergy Network (www.foodallergy.org 703/691-3179) is an excellent source of information for food allergies.
- See worship suggestions at www.thelutheran.org/0201/page10b.html
- Articles, recipes and helpful suggestions www.livingwithout.com
- Common chemicals and their effects www.ourlittleplace.com/chemicals.html or www.healthyfamiliesnow.org

Diane Monroe is associate director for youth education and confirmation and Christian education in the ELCA Division for Congregational Ministries.