

Be aware! Be prepared!

Hi!

You are about to leave school and choose a job. Are you aware that an allergy can occur at any age and that certain jobs can bring on allergies? If you or members of your family suffer from allergies, take a few minutes to read this pamphlet. You will find lots of useful advice.



What exactly is an allergy?

Two out of ten people have allergies. An allergy is provoked when the body has an exaggerated reaction to an outside object called an antigen or an **allergen**. This results in the development of **antibodies**. When the allergen, for instance pollen, sticks to the antibody, the antibody releases substances that can provoke an allergic inflammation – a sort of swelling – of the nose, eyes, lungs or the skin.

What is an allergic inflammation of the nose (rhinitis) or the eye (conjunctivitis)?

It is also called rhinoconjunctivitis or hay fever. You sneeze and your nose is itchy, runny or clogged. Inflammation of the eye is also called conjunctivitis. Your eyes are red, watery, closed by secretions; your eyelids are swollen; even your ears are itchy.

The allergic inflammation of the bronchi (the lungs tiny air channels) is called asthma

When an allergic person breathes in allergens, the diameter of the bronchi becomes narrower, increased secretions slow down the airflow, breathing can become difficult and wheezy. **Rhinitis often occurs before asthma.**

An allergic inflammation of the skin can appear as:

- **eczema**: your skin is red, itchy in places, it can be moist or dry and cracked.
- **urticaria**: your skin becomes rapidly very itchy in various places, and can swell up too; it can flare up and disappear; and if your throat swells up, choking can occur suddenly.

Which jobs could cause an allergy or make it worse ?

Contact with substances used in the workplace (animal or vegetable proteins, chemicals) can set off a new allergy or reactivate an old one.

Here are a few examples	Hairdresser	dyes, colorants, perm chemical, nickel, chrome
	Baker and cook	flour, egg, raw vegetables
	Nurse	disinfectants, latex, drugs
	Builder	cement, resins
	Mechanic, coach-maker	metals, lubricants, paints
	Carpenter, joiner	wood dust, glues, varnishes
	Laboratory worker, veterinary assistant	diverse substances and chemical, animal hair
	Farmer, horticulturist	animal and vegetable proteins, chemicals

Here are the stories of three apprentices who came to our allergy practice with common work related allergic problems.

Ann, an 18-year old apprentice hairdresser



Neither Ann nor her family had any history of allergies. At work, she did the shampoo-and-rinses for perms, her hands were often wet, and she cleaned the salon with detergents.

Three months after starting work, she developed eczema on her hands. Over the holidays the eczema disappeared, but it reappeared when she came back to work and it got progressively worse.

The doctor carried out a few skin tests with the products used at Ann's workplace and an allergy was diagnosed for a variety of substances used in dyes and perms. The eczema was treated with an anti-inflammatory cream. To stop her hands from getting wet, she wore cotton gloves under her vinyl gloves. Between hand-washings, Ann applied a protective cream and at night she regularly applied a fatty cream. Ann's employer made a declaration to the occupational health insurance because these allergies are a well-known cause of eczema among hairdressers.

Ann consulted an allergy specialist quickly once she had symptoms, and conscientiously followed her prescribed treatment. She is now free of eczema, has passed her hairdresser's certificate and has no more health problems at work.

Lessons from Ann's story

- Like most apprentices, Ann knew nothing about the risk of eczema faced by hairdressers.
- If Ann had had to change her apprenticeship, the occupational health insurance scheme could have helped to find her a new one.
- The web site **www.2mains.ch** helped her to find information on how to protect herself.

Nathalie, a 19-year old in the third year of baker's apprenticeship



Nathalie had a runny nose for three years and she often coughed when exposed to flour, but she never went to consult a doctor. Her hands even became itchy on contact with the rubber spatula. One evening, she was rushed to hospital emergency unit with an asthma attack.

The allergy specialist diagnosed allergies to both flour and rubber (latex).

The question was, should Nathalie stop her apprenticeship and choose another career? First of all, she

had to be treated for her asthma and rhinitis.

She began to wear a mask at work, and latex-free vinyl gloves. She saw her doctor regularly. Thanks to these actions, Nathalie felt much better and obtained her certificate as a baker and pastry cook. She was lucky!

Lesson's from Nathalie's story

- Do not wait for an acute asthma attack or an emergency before consulting your doctor.
- Be aware that rhinitis often appears before asthma.

Mike, a 16-year old, allergic in his final year at school



Mike has had hay fever, but no asthma, for four years. He finished his 9th school year and had already done a one week training with a landscape gardener. As he had no problems, Mike decided to start the landscape gardening apprenticeship. However, when he ate kiwi fruit or melon, his throat got prickly and itchy.

He visited an allergy specialist and asked, "Do you think that I can have a career as a landscape gar-

dener, or will the job just make my hay fever worse?

At home, Mike had 2 cats and 2 dogs; his mattress was old, but he had new feather pillows.

He did not smoke and his family has no known allergies.

Allergy tests diagnosed rhino conjunctivitis linked to Mike's contact with tree and wheat pollens, but also to bed mites and dog hair.

How should we approach Mike's question ?

- Did all those positive tests mean that it was not advisable for Mike to become a landscape gardener? **No**, because the positive tests did not reflect Mike's light, seasonal symptoms. If Mike had had asthma – a more serious symptom than rhinitis – it would not be recommended to take such a job.
- Should Mike simply be allowed to take this job because he has had no symptoms during his training week? **No**, because one week is too short to exclude the development of an allergy.

Lessons from Mike's story

- If an apprentice is very motivated to do a job, despite the risk of work related allergies, he should, be allowed to run that risk, by taking the appropriate precautions.
- The apprentice should be informed that hay fever can worsen by having an outdoor job, such as landscape gardener. This means that his doctor should keep an eye on him and he should get regular treatment during the pollen season.
- He should be advised to wear a mask when working with trees he is allergic to. By avoiding contact with the allergen, Mike will lower the risk of making his hay fever worse.
- It should be explained to him how to diminish exposure to allergens in his home (bed mites, contact with animals).

Mike followed all these advices. After finishing his final year of schooling, he completed his apprenticeship as a landscape gardener without any problems and went on to obtain a second certificate in arboriculture. His hay fever even improved.

Practical advice

- **Presently you may not have any allergies**, but have you chosen a job related to the list on page 2? Now you know what could happen to you during your apprenticeship.
- **If you do, or did, have allergies**, you should speak to your doctor in order to discuss your choice of career. You should also ask your parents for support and advice, as well as your careers advisor and your future apprentice supervisor.
- If, despite all this, you do develop some work-related health problems during your apprenticeship, consult your doctor without delay. You must look after your health **and** your career!

Summary

- Having an allergy should not mean that you must rule out a choice of apprenticeship, or cancel plans for your future that you are very motivated about.
- If you are hesitating between jobs, one may be less risky than another.
- In jobs where there is a risk of allergy, this risk can be reduced by limiting exposure to the allergenic products. Good working conditions are therefore fundamental.
- If you have to change apprenticeship because of a work related allergy, the occupational health insurance can help you, and provide you with financial support.

Useful web sites

www.suva.ch

www.admin.seco.ch

www.i-s-t.ch

www.ciao.ch

www.orientation.ch

A more comprehensive brochure on the subject is available on website www.sgai.ch.

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