

Something Invisible , Something Toxic ...

Two years into flying long-haul flights, allergies, or so I thought, began annoying me. Itchy skin, irritated, red eyes, breathing problems and dry coughs kept bothering me always during and after many flights.

But I thought nothing of it; although irritating it wasn't too bad and the doctors said, after their usual patch test routine, that I had a few allergies to pollen, trees and some animals. I did? I never knew... after all I had lived with cats and dogs and I used to go riding. As a child I had even helped out on a neighbouring farm, raking the hay in summer and mucking out the stables in winter.

I was told that such allergies can appear out of the blue, and to best have a series of desensitisation shots. I asked the doctor, who was a specialist for allergies and skin problems, if it could have anything to do with the aerosol disinsectant sprays we had to spray on board before landing in some countries. He said he doubted it, since according to his information they were harmless and suggested again to have the desensitisation shots done. So, I did that, three years in a row, from January to April, but they didn't seem to have the desired effect, except that my arm got very sore, swollen and inflamed and I still had those 'allergic' reactions.

Breathing Difficulties

The time came when I started making the connection between the spraying of the disinsectant sprays and my coughing, sneezing and itchy, red eyes. I sometimes was also short of breath and wheezy directly after spraying. One inevitably inhaled some of the mist sprayed overhead of the passengers, which then rained down softly onto their heads, before landing in Australia, South Africa and many other places. This was done to kill any mosquitoes and other bugs that could bring unwanted illnesses, like malaria, into these countries. We had to spray

and empty six to eight cans of this insect-killer, of which we were told was harmless for humans. These had to then be presented to the health officer who boarded the plane, closing the door behind himself again, and who would then check the aircraft and the empty cans, before allowing disembarkation.

I began feeling nauseated when filling my car with petrol, and had to cover my nose to avoid inhaling the rising fumes. My husband made fun of me, telling me how nice it smelled, and he took deep breaths to demonstrate it. My chest got tight and I often gasped for breath, coughing violently, when I accidentally inhaled a 'mouthful' of perfume or paint. My mouth and throat went instantly bone dry and swollen. I didn't seem to be able to tolerate any fragranced products, such as cleaning products, laundry detergents and fabric softeners, never mind my perfumes.

Showering or taking a bath was becoming an ordeal. My skin started to itch like I had hundreds of ants under my skin, and red, angry-looking flares appeared, along with outbreaks looking like measles all over my body. My legs were worst, and no amount of scratching until the skin was raw and bleeding, nor applying of ointments, stopped it. I couldn't figure out if it was from the water, or from the shower gel or from the detergents in the towels. I couldn't use pools either; the chlorine in the water in contact with my skin and the smell of it had the same effect, so I quit swimming.

Before long my asthma attacks increased and got so bad that my physicians, now two of them, gave me prescriptions for an inhaler and anti-histamine medication, together with the diagnosis: adult onset of bronchial asthma, probably induced by allergies. I was told to stay home for three weeks. Again I mentioned that I seemed to have the problem on board and mainly when we had to spray those insecticide sprays before landing – but still they didn't make a connection, assuring me of the harmlessness of those sprays.

I went on my next flights thinking I must have an allergy problem and

possibly some kind of flu then, and since it had eased off after the sick leave and I also didn't feel so completely exhausted any more, I thought all was fine.

In 1982, after an Osaka to Anchorage flight, I arrived home with severe palpitations, headache, and massive tremor in numb, but at the same time, tingling hands, fluttering eye lids, and a feeling of utter distress. The airline medic, who was my first port of call, thought I was having a jet-lag issue, and told me to go home and rest for a few days.

Two or three days later my heart was still racing, my pulse was constantly at around 125 beats per minute. I hardly slept at night and felt very hot all the time. I lost weight rapidly, although I was eating and always hungry, and I was very edgy. I finally visited my physician who diagnosed a hyperactive thyroid gland just by the symptoms I showed, but she also followed up with the relevant blood tests to confirm. All levels were way too high. She thought that this could have happened due to jet-lag and way too many long-haul and night flights, and again prescribed a two week sick leave. I told her that sometimes I coughed more after using the inhaler, so she changed the prescription, assuming that I was reacting to some ingredient. I had stopped smoking long ago, so that wasn't the problem. She was confused and decided we would monitor this for a while and see.

I had to take medication for the thyroid to rebalance it, which helped. Not a thought was given by anyone of the possibility that toxic compounds I might be in contact with, that can disrupt the endocrine system (US National Library of Medicine¹), could be a reason, although such facts were already well documented.

In the years that followed I learned that one sometimes has to (gently) guide the physicians in the right direction but, of course, to do that one has to have at least some basic knowledge and information in toxicology oneself, which at the time I did not.

When we came on board an aircraft, especially after it had arrived from

a long-haul flight, most of us noticed a stuffy, weird, sometimes mouldy smell comparable to a wet dog, or sweaty sock smells as if a whole gym had been on board, and other unpleasant smells, such as vomit. We never knew what it was, wrinkled our noses, commented on it, and sometimes sprayed our own expensive perfumes to cover it up and just got on with our job.

In time I became aware that my uniform smelled awful after flights, so much so I couldn't bear it! After each flight it had to be hand-washed. Dry cleaning had become impossible since I had noticed that the smell from the dry cleaners caused me sneezing and skin reactions. The horrible musty smell wasn't removed by dry cleaning anyway; on the contrary, it seemed to increase it. I suddenly had a persistent ringing in my ears. Headaches had become my constant companion, which was unusual for me, and the wheezing and full blown asthma attacks, gasping for breath, were becoming more frequent; only easing when I had several days off between flights.

Allergies to all kinds of things began manifesting as the list grew longer and longer, accompanied in time not only by sneezing, red eyes and sinusitis, but nose bleeds and terribly itchy skin, balance problems and dizziness. I was also developing a sensitive digestion, which was most annoying. I had always been proud of a digestion and stomach as 'strong as a horse's', but that dramatically changed. The swollen 'Boeing-baby-belly' never ceased and certain foods caused severe IBS symptoms.

When I drank wine, my skin flared up into an angry-looking red-hot and itchy blotch just above my chest and up my throat. Sometimes the inside of my nose went bone dry and swelled up and I had to breathe through my mouth; my lungs also reacted, with dry coughing, and the now well-known wheezing, which came with sounds of squeaking, was very disturbing. I used to laugh it off and said that I was a great indicator for cheap wines². Little did I know what I was indicating!

It usually took a day or more for these reactions to calm down.

One day I nearly suffocated after just finishing a kiwi fruit. My tongue and throat went dry, swelled up within seconds and I could scarcely breathe – I was terrified I was going to suffocate and I tried hard not to panic. I was brought to ER where they gave me anti-histamines and a saline drip. I was diagnosed with a sulphites and mould fungus allergy, which explained, as I was told, the reactions to wine. But what caused my reaction to the kiwi no one could tell me.

Very much later I learned that vine-growing kiwis, like grapes, are heavily sprayed with pesticides and fungicides³.

The years went by. I used my inhaler a lot and took anti-histamine tablets, plus the thyroid hormones and sometimes painkillers for the headaches. I wasn't sleeping well and felt terribly tired most of the time. The airline's policies had changed and our rest times were becoming shorter until they were down to 'minimum' rest time.

My sensitivity of smell had increased dramatically; so much so that I wasn't able to tolerate the fumes from those disinfectant sprays at all, plus many other smells. They made me feel so nauseous and within seconds I got the now well-known symptoms: headaches, red eyes and itchy skin, plus a feeling of dizziness and (hooray!) new symptoms: a feeling as if my brain was swollen and was applying pressure onto my left ear, causing hearing and balance problems.

Fragrances and scents from perfumes my colleagues were wearing started bothering me a lot. Many colleagues were also commenting in the meantime and to at least avoid the fumes from the disinfectant sprays we sometimes sprayed them empty outside of the aircraft doors before the passengers arrived. If that wasn't an option because some purser was abiding strictly by the rules, we sprayed them into the toilets, arm and shoulder, nothing else, reaching inside trying to keep the door closed as much as possible while emptying the cans.

Trying not to worry or become paranoid I just relied on the physicians' diagnoses – what could I do? At that time I still trusted fully in their

wisdom and knowledge. And I continued flying. What a mistake.

My doctors advised me to take a long break. After more allergy testing, the list had again increased, my asthma was worse and the skin on my inner lower arms to the elbows never healed up. So I applied for a 'Kur', which is a form of health cure, in olden days called 'to take the waters' at specialised healthcare centres, a mix between clinics and hotels, which are located in well-known, approved and registered areas with unpolluted air, fresh water and generally healthy environment. After spending four weeks in a beautiful place in Bavaria, Germany, and under medical supervision, with special food and treatments, lots of fresh air and good water, I felt very much better.

It didn't last long.

From Bearnairdine's book:

The Air I Breathe - It's Classified

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