



ask Jason

Dr. Jason Karlawish deals with medical issues facing you and your loved ones

Staying out of the sun (no matter how invincible you think you are), the lowdown on hot flashes and why you're never too old to develop a sudden allergy.

Q Nothing but nothing will keep my 87-year-old dad off the golf course. He's bald and has fair skin, and every spring I buy him another hat, but he never wears them. He says if he hasn't gotten skin cancer by now, he's never going to get it. Is that true?

Nancy D., Phoenix, Arizona

A The longer we live, the more likely it is that we'll get skin cancer related to sun exposure, and although past behavior – those summer vacations taken 20 or 30 years ago – are a factor, what we do now is just as important. So your dad is wrong if he thinks that nothing he does now will make a difference, and if he has no hair and fair skin, he's really taking his chances. He needs to be keeping an eye on his scalp to check for any changes that might indicate skin cancer, and if you can't persuade him to wear a hat, then he needs to wear sunblock of at least SPF30. Seeking out some shade on the golf course will help, too. By not wearing a hat in the sun, he could also be putting himself at risk of dehydration – a particular problem for seniors, because as we get older, our ability to detect thirst diminishes, as does our ability to rehydrate sufficiently. Next time your dad goes out to play golf, ask him to take along a bottle of water.

Q My mom is 82 yet she still complains of hot flashes. Could this be related to the menopause and – this is what really worries me – will I experience the same thing? I'm 52, and am just beginning to have them myself.

Stacey H., Wilmington, Delaware



A You are destined to have your own and not your mother's history of menopause. Research suggests that the onset (especially the early onset) of menopause is hereditary, but not the duration or severity of symptoms, so you don't have anything to worry about there. The real issue here is your mother. Hot flashes usually last for one to five years, and can be treated with estrogen and other proven therapies. They can continue after 70, but this would be unusual, and there may be other reasons why your mother is getting them. She could be suffering from endocrinological problems such as an overactive thyroid – a disorder associated with hot flashes and palpitations as well as symptoms such as skin and hair thinning, which you might have overlooked, since they are also linked with aging. Women are ten times more likely than men to have an overactive thyroid, and the disorder can be treated by drugs and sometimes surgery. Your mom needs to talk to a specialist, either by visiting her doctor for a check-up or going directly to an endocrinologist.

Q I've been eating shrimp my whole life, but recently I seem to break out in a rash every time they're on the menu. I've never been allergic to anything before – can I start now, age 61?

Marcela M., Scranton, Pennsylvania

A It's a myth that allergic reactions are something that children suffer from more than older adults.

As we age, our immune system changes and our bodies become sloppier at being able to distinguish between what's good for us and what is not. This has all sorts of results: diseases in which the human body effectively attacks itself, such as rheumatoid arthritis, and an increase in allergic reactions to things that we had no problem with before – the most prevalent group of asthmatics, for example, is the elderly. In your case, your body thinks that shrimp is a foreign object that needs to be fought, hence the rash. You should consider seeing an allergist who is trained in skin testing who can help to clearly diagnose whether you in fact have this food allergy – and if you do, it's really important that you avoid seafood. If your reaction is severe, you might want to ask your doctor to prescribe you an Epi (epinephrine) pen, for the emergency treatment of allergic reactions. A seafood allergy means that you are also potentially sensitive to the iodine-based contrast agents administered by radiologists – worth mentioning if you ever have to have an X-ray. 📧

Get in touch

Dr. Jason may be able to address your concerns in a future issue.

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