

The past thirty to forty years have seen a huge increase in the number of children who suffer from allergies, and scientists are still looking for the explanation. Some have blamed increased air pollution, but it has also been found that allergies are common not only among children in the city but also among children in the countryside, where pollution is typically much lower.

A currently popular explanation for the rise in allergies is the so-called "hygiene hypothesis." The basic idea is that young children brought up in an environment which is too clean are more at risk of developing allergies.

Nowadays, people bathe and wash their clothes more frequently than in the past, and thanks to vacuum cleaners homes are less dusty, too. One result of all these changes is that in their early lives children are exposed to fewer allergens --- substances that can cause allergies --- and this means that their bodies cannot build up natural immunity to them. Simply put, exposure to allergy-causing substances is necessary for natural protection against them to develop.

The trend towards smaller families also means that young children encounter fewer allergens in the home. In fact, it is known that children who have older brothers and sisters are more resistant to allergies. The same is true of children who share their home with a pet. Such children are much less likely to develop the very common allergy to cat or dog hair, for example.

Scientists agree that being exposed to a wider range of allergens early in life helps children to develop greater immunity. There is, however, also some data suggesting that genetics, family income, and even the parents' level of education may play a part in how likely a child is to suffer from allergies. Thus, although the hygiene hypothesis is an important area for research, we cannot yet be sure that too much attention to cleanliness is the only explanation for the enormous rise in the number of allergy victims.