Allergic From Birth

Phyllis Frugé’s youthful face, framed by dark brown hair pulled straight back into a ponytail, does not hint of the harsh realities she has had to face because of the allergies her young child Jacques has battled since birth.

“I moved into my new home, and two weeks later Jacques was born—a Caesarian birth—with terrible eczema, asthma and allergies. I felt as if I lived under a big, dark cloud,” says Phyllis, gesturing with hands above head.

Her daughter Emily, now 8, is and has been “as healthy as a horse.” So Phyllis was not prepared for the onslaught of problems she and husband Jack, a local attorney, had to face following Jacques’ birth.

First of all, there was the eczema—spots on the face, bleeding sores on the body—from which Jacques lost one fingernail. At three months Jacques looked “like he had leprosy, ... like a neglected child,” according to his mother. She felt ashamed to take him to Mother’s Day Out or anywhere else when he looked like that.

“Jacques’ problems changed our lives totally,” says Phyllis.

After consulting a steady stream of doctors and performing cold tar treatments at home, which were recommended by some doctors but put down by others, she finally found Dr. Bernard Frugé (no relation to them), who put Jacques, now 5, on a regimen that has allowed the entire family to achieve some sort of normality in their lives.

“Now I feel more confident. I have a routine, and I know what to do when Jacques encounters a problem,” says Phyllis.

But at 3 1/2 years old when Jacques had his first severe asthma attack, Phyllis was unprepared. “Thinking back, I realize that he could have died. He couldn’t breathe; his fever skyrocketed,” says Phyllis.

There have been three emergency room visits for the asthma, but none since the boy began seeing Frugé.

Allergy tests were performed and Jacques was found to be allergic to almost everything in the environment: the pine trees that line the street on which the Frugés live, dust mites, pollen, grass, pecan trees, and the list goes on and on.

The Frugés now own their own nebulizer, a “breathing machine” that allows Jacques to get needed medication to his lungs. Jacques usually has three treatments each day for his asthma.

“It used to scare him, but now he reads a book, or his sister Emily or I read to him while he takes his treatment. Sadly enough, it has become normal to him. But it’s still hard for his father to go into Jacques’ bedroom and see him with his nebulizer mask on,” says Phyllis.

Jacques used to visit Dr. Frugé’s office twice a week for allergy shots, now it’s only once a week.

In order to tolerate the weekly injections, Jacques has developed a routine. “First he kisses me on one cheek, then on the other. Then he has to throw something away in the wastebasket. Then he finds something else to throw away. But, thank goodness, the nurses are very patient and kind and participate in Jacques’ ritual. Finally, he’s able to take his allergy shot,” says Phyllis.

Now, unlike two short years ago, when the Frugés take a short vacation as they did this summer, Jacques can miss his shots without the dramatic, frightening consequences of the past.

The eczema is still a problem, but it is controllable now—just like the asthma and the other allergies. Cortizone cream and another special moisturizing cream, as well as special soaps, help keep Jacques’ skin from developing the bleeding sores he had in the past. Now, there are merely dry spots on his skin.

Dust mites are kept to a minimum by special coverings for box springs, mattresses and pillows. Phyllis says they are about to have all of their air-conditioning filters changed to the special type to help those with severe allergies. Most of her friends who smoke considerably smoke out of the house, not exposing Jacques to the hazards of secondary smoke.

Since Phyllis, as a child, had some allergies and eczema, which is also caused by allergies, she had some background from which to understand Jacques’ problems. But hers were minimal compared with those of her son.

Both parents have worried about whether Jacques will be able to participate in sports. “I am concerned about sports for Jacques because of his allergies and because of his small size, but we just have to play it by ear,” says Phyllis.

When the family visits Jack’s family in Ville Platte, Jacques seems to have more breathing problems. “Maybe it’s the carbon-black plant in town. Who knows? But travel is often scary,” says Phyllis.

Displacement from the controlled environment of Jacques’ home has often brought on problems in the past. During the freeze of ’89, the Frugé’s home was damaged, and they had to spend two months in a hotel. Jacques’ asthma worsened during this time because of the new environment, which contained many new substances with which Jacques’ body had to deal.

Although she worries about Jacques’ entering kindergarten this fall, Phyllis feels much more confident than ever before that the family will be able to handle his problems.

“There is hope,” she says. “Jacques has gotten so much better!”