

## *A Little Bit of Discomfort Brings Relief*

Every day when Erminia Cardenas goes to work, she performs a simple test that can change the lives of her patients.

Cardenas, who is a licensed vocational nurse in Houston, uses tiny prongs to prick the skin on her patients' backs. There are 80 prongs in all, and each contains something different—from grass pollen to mold to cat dander.



The procedure is often the first step in unlocking the mystery of what is causing her patients' unexplained sneezing fits, watery eyes, and even difficulty in breathing—all symptoms of allergies. For Cardenas's patients, the test is fascinating: Could the cause of all their problems be something as simple as the goose-feather-stuffed comforter on their bed, or could the culprit be a type of tree that lines the streets in their neighborhood?

If one or more of the pricks begin to itch, swell, or turn red, Cardenas has the answer. Even though the prong pricks cause a bit of discomfort, finally learning the cause of their difficulties can be a huge relief to patients.

"We have one patient, a young man who works on the golf course at a country club, who came to us because he had started sneezing every time he went out on the course," says Cardenas. "When we tested him, he was allergic to all the grasses and tree pollens that surrounded him on the golf course—he was a mess, poor thing! He said, 'I can't give up my job,' so we put him on shots and he's doing very well."

Cardenas, whose ancestors are Mexican, considers herself lucky because she doesn't have any allergies. Neither did her parents, which was fortunate, since they were migrant workers who spent a lot of time outdoors in the cotton fields. As a baby, Cardenas traveled with her parents to the fields. "If they ever had allergies, it wasn't severe—not like what the patients I see have," she says.

*Cardenas, continued on next page*

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But her son suffers from watery eyes and sneezing when the season changes every year from summer to fall. The good news is that, with treatment, even people who suffer from severe allergies can control their symptoms.

“Some of our patients can even give themselves shots at home, if their symptoms are milder,” says Cardenas.

Cardenas, a mother of three who returned to nursing after taking time off to raise her children, sounds positively maternal when she talks about her patients. She worries that many of the patients she sees—who range from airline pilots to lawyers to fellow nurses—have such demanding jobs that their symptoms can worsen because of the pressure. “Sometimes because they’re so stressed at work, they don’t take care of themselves,” she says. “I think stress can aggravate allergies.”

So can the change of seasons—and Cardenas, who talked about her job on a beautiful March day when the spring’s first flowers were pushing through the ground, knew she would be in for a busy time at work.

That’s just fine for Cardenas. After all, she knows that after patients come to her office and receive a proper diagnosis and treatment, they might actually be able to sit outside and take in nature’s beauty—without suffering from a sneezing fit.