

Coping with Allergies

According to the American Academy of Allergy, Asthma and Immunology, approximately 50 million Americans suffer from some form of allergic disease, and the number is increasing. An allergy is an exaggerated immune response or reaction to substances that are generally not harmful. Allergies may make certain medical conditions, such as sinus problems, eczema and asthma, even worse.

Common Allergens

Allergies start when a person comes in contact with an allergen to which he or she is allergic. The immune system starts working to protect itself from the specific allergen by forming IgE antibodies. These antibodies produce histamine, causing reactions such as sneezing, itching, watery eyes, etc. Antihistamine medications can combat some allergy symptoms; they lower the increased histamine levels.

Most allergies come from harmless, common allergen sources. These include:

- Animal dander
- Dust mites
- Tree pollen
- Grasses, weeds and flowers
- Molds
- Insect droppings
- Insect stings
- Medications
- Foods

Some allergens increase or decrease based on the seasons, while others are present year-round. Generally, you can expect the following allergens to have a higher presence during these times:

- Late spring: tree pollen
- Early summer: grass
- Late summer: ragweed
- Fall and winter: dust mites
- Spring, summer and fall: outdoor molds
- All seasons: pet dander, insect stings, insect droppings, medications and foods

Allergy symptoms may include:

- Breathing problems (coughing, shortness of breath)
- Burning, tearing or itchy eyes
- Conjunctivitis (red, swollen eyes)

- Coughing
- Diarrhea
- Headache
- Hives
- Itching of the nose, mouth, throat, skin or any other area
- Runny nose
- Skin rashes
- Stomach cramps
- Vomiting
- Wheezing

The part of the body the allergen touches affects what symptoms you develop. For example:

- Allergens that you breathe in often cause a stuffy nose, itchy nose and throat, mucus production, cough, or wheezing.
- Allergens that touch the eyes may cause itchy, watery, red or swollen eyes.
- Eating something you are allergic to can cause nausea, vomiting, abdominal pain, cramping or diarrhea, or a severe, life-threatening reaction.
- Allergens that touch the skin can cause a skin rash, hives, itching, blisters or skin peeling.
- Drug allergies usually involve the whole body and can lead to a variety of symptoms.

Getting Tested

Getting an allergy test is the first step to combating allergies. A typical visit to the allergist will include a personal history and a physical exam, with close examination of the eyes, nose and throat. If it appears allergies are present, then the doctor will administer a skin test (also known as a prick test). Skin testing is a highly effective way of determining exactly what you are allergic to. The test is a simple pinprick (or series of pricks) in which a variety of allergens are administered. Within a few minutes, itching or redness will indicate what you are allergic to.

It is important to get tested if you feel you suffer from allergies. Left untreated, symptoms can lead to further complications, including asthma and chronic sinus disease. In some cases, the doctor may tell you to avoid certain items to see if you get better, or to use suspected items to see if you feel worse. This is called "use or elimination testing." This is often used to check for food or medication allergies.

The doctor may also check your reaction to physical triggers by applying heat, cold or other stimulation to your body and watching for an allergic response.

Sometimes a suspected allergen is dissolved and dropped into the lower eyelid to check for an allergic reaction. This should only be done by a health care provider.

Treating the Symptoms

Severe allergic reactions (anaphylaxis) need to be treated with a medicine called epinephrine, which can be life-saving when given right away. If you use epinephrine, call 911, and go straight to the hospital.

There are several types of medications to prevent and treat allergies. Which medicine your doctor recommends depends on the type and severity of your symptoms, your age, and your overall health.

Illnesses that are caused by allergies (such as asthma, hay fever and eczema) may need other treatments.

Medications that can be used to treat allergies include:

Antihistamines

Antihistamines are available over the counter and by prescription. They are available in many forms, including:

- Capsules and pills
- Eye drops
- Injection
- Liquid
- Nasal spray

Corticosteroids

Anti-inflammatory medications (corticosteroids) are available in many forms, including:

- Creams and ointment for the skin
- Eye drops
- Nasal spray
- Lung inhaler

Patients with severe allergic symptoms may be prescribed corticosteroid pills or injections for short periods of time.

Decongestants

Decongestants can help relieve a stuffy nose. Do not use a decongestant nasal spray for more than several days because they can cause a "rebound" effect and make the congestion worse. Decongestants in pill form do not cause this problem.

People with high blood pressure, heart problems or prostate enlargement should use decongestants with caution.

Immunotherapy

Allergy shots are most effective when used to treat people with hay fever symptoms and severe insect sting allergies. They are not used to treat food allergies because of the danger of a severe reaction.

Allergy shots (immunotherapy) are sometimes recommended if an individual cannot avoid the allergen and the symptoms are hard to control. Allergy shots keep the body from overreacting to the allergen. Regular injections of the allergen are required. Each dose is slightly larger than the last dose until a maximum dose is reached. These shots do not work for everyone, and the individual will have to visit the doctor often.

Avoiding Allergies

If you do suffer from allergies, try these simple steps to lessen your symptoms:

- Eliminate dust from your home: Clean weekly by dusting with a damp cloth, mopping the floors and vacuuming the carpets.
- Keep pollen and outside molds outside: Keep windows closed at night, use the air conditioner in warmer weather, drive with your windows rolled up and avoid outdoor activities when counts of allergens are high.
- Eliminate indoor mold and mildew: Clean the bathroom, house plants, refrigerator seals and drip trays, air conditioners, humidifiers, and garbage cans weekly. Make sure good ventilation is available in mold-prone areas such as basements, bathrooms, shower stalls and fresh-food storage areas.
- Reduce dust mites: Lower your home's temperature and humidity level; wash all bed linens weekly; enclose your mattress and box spring in dust-proof covers; and thoroughly vacuum carpets, mattresses, upholstered furniture and drapes.
- Be vigilant about food allergies: For some, even a trace of a food allergen can cause a reaction. When dining out, be certain to inform the staff of any food allergies. When eating in, thoroughly wash all utensils, pans and cutting boards between food preparations.
- If friends or relatives have pets to which you are allergic, request that the animal be sequestered prior to visiting, or meet at a neutral location.
- Ask your pharmacist if any prescription or OTC medications contain substances to which you are allergic.

Children and Allergies

If your child starts sneezing, has runny eyes or a scratchy throat, you may assume he or she has a cold. However, the cause may be allergies, especially if either of the parents suffer from allergies.

A specific allergy is not usually passed down through families (inherited). However, if both parents have allergies, their children are likely to have allergies. The chance is greater if the mother has allergies.

Resources

- American Academy of Allergy, Asthma & Immunology: www.aaaai.org
- Asthma and Allergy Foundation of America: www.aafa.org
- Food Allergy Research & Education: www.foodallergy.org

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