

# Allergy Prevention

One in five Americans suffers from allergies. Allergy symptoms can affect almost every system in the body. The respiratory system, digestive system, skin and eyes are most commonly affected.

## What Is an Allergy?

An allergic reaction occurs when your immune system responds to something that is not usually harmful. Normally when a virus or other harmful substance enters the body, the immune system responds by destroying the virus. In a person with allergies, the immune system overreacts to harmless substances. Everyday substances like dust or pollen can cause an allergic reaction. Even food and medication can trigger allergies. While there is no cure for allergies, there are ways to manage the symptoms.

## Allergies That Affect Your Nose

Sneezing, sniffing and a runny nose are symptoms of allergies that you breathe in. Both outdoor and indoor allergens can trigger this type of reaction. Common indoor allergens are:

- Dust mites
- Mold
- Pet dander

Indoor allergies are usually year round.

An allergy triggered by outdoor allergens is often called hay fever or seasonal allergy. The symptoms are caused by pollen from:

- Trees
- Ragweed
- Grasses

Nasal allergy symptoms are very similar to the symptoms of a cold. Symptoms may include:

- Stuffy, runny nose
- Sneezing
- Watery, itchy eyes
- Itchy nose and throat
- Issues with smell
- Clogged ears
- Sore throat
- Cough
- Fatigue

The symptoms of allergies and a cold are very similar. A doctor can help you to diagnose which one you have. A fever indicates a cold. Sudden onset of symptoms or



those that change with the seasons are probably allergies. A cold usually doesn't last for very long while allergies could last for weeks.

There are many ways to treat nasal allergies. The best treatment is to avoid the allergen. That may be hard to do all the time. You can limit indoor allergens by washing bedding, dusting and vacuuming often. For outdoor allergies, wear a dust mask when pollen counts are high.

A wide range of treatments can help relieve allergy symptoms. The severity of your symptoms will determine what your doctor recommends.

**Antihistamines** block histamine, a chemical your body produces during an allergic reaction. Antihistamines can be taken by mouth, through a nasal spray or in eye drops. Many oral antihistamines are available at drugstores and do not require a prescription.

**Corticosteroids** work by preventing the release of chemicals that cause symptoms of an allergic reaction. You need a prescription for most corticosteroids.

**Decongestants** relieve nasal and sinus congestion. They are available over-the-counter and as prescriptions. They can be taken orally, nasally and through eye drops.

**Allergy shots** may be given if you cannot avoid the allergen or if your symptoms are hard to control. The allergen is injected in increasingly larger doses each time to help your body slowly adjust to the allergen.

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## Skin Allergens

A skin reaction occurs when your skin comes in contact with an allergen. Symptoms include rash, hives, blisters, itching and peeling skin. Some skin reactions are caused by food you eat or by an allergen in the air. Allergic skin reactions can occur at any time, even with a product you have been using for a while. Common allergens that cause skin reactions include:

- Fragrances
- Metals in jewelry
- Preservatives in cosmetics, shampoo and other personal care products
- Latex
- Poison ivy, poison oak and poison sumac

Treatment for skin allergies is to avoid the allergen. If the allergen is in common household products, reading labels will help you to avoid it. Your doctor may also prescribe a corticosteroid cream or an antihistamine.

## Food Allergies

Food allergies are on the rise. According to the Food Allergy and Anaphylaxis Network, as many as 15 million people in the U.S. have food allergies. The top food allergens are:

- Peanuts
- Tree nuts such as walnuts, almonds, cashews and hazelnuts
- Fish
- Shellfish
- Milk
- Eggs
- Soy
- Wheat

Symptoms of food allergies can be mild, such as a rash or itching. They can also be as severe as trouble breathing, wheezing or loss of consciousness. Tingling or swelling of the mouth and tongue, vomiting, abdominal cramps and diarrhea may also occur. Food allergies can be fatal.

Anaphylaxis is the most severe symptom of a food allergy. With anaphylaxis the blood vessels widen so much that blood pressure drops severely. Other symptoms include flushed skin, swelling of the lips or joints, paleness, panting, rapid pulse, faintness, wheezing, convulsions and passing out. Anaphylaxis requires an immediate trip to the emergency department and a shot of epinephrine (adrenaline).

Strict avoidance of the allergen is the best way to avoid an allergic reaction. Read the list of ingredients on food labels. Know about the ingredients in your food. Your doctor may prescribe a self-injectable form of epinephrine most commonly known as an EpiPen.

## Drug Allergies

Some common drugs can also cause an allergic reaction. These drugs include:

- Antibiotics
- Anticonvulsants
- Insulin

Symptoms include skin rashes and hives, digestive issues and anaphylaxis. Symptoms can occur within minutes of taking the drug or up to a few days later. If you suspect an allergy to a drug, immediately stop taking it and call your doctor or pharmacist.

## Insect Allergies

For most people, insect bites are an annoyance, but for two million Americans, insects can cause a life-threatening allergic reaction. The most common insects to cause a serious allergic reaction are bees, wasps, hornets, yellow jackets and fire ants. For people with insect venom allergies, anaphylaxis could develop and an EpiPen should be carried at all times.

## Summary

Most of us either suffer from allergies or know someone who does. While there is no cure for allergies, steps can be taken to avoid the allergen. Plus there are medicines to help relieve symptoms. If you think you may have allergies, talk to your healthcare provider. He or she can come up with the best treatment plan for you.

### Resource:

Asthma and Allergy Foundation of America <http://www.aafa.org/>  
US National Library of Medicine  
<http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmedhealth>  
The Food Allergy and Anaphylaxis Network  
<http://www.foodallergy.org>