

Allergies (Allergic Rhinitis)

DESCRIPTION

Allergies are an allergic reaction to particles in the air. Sometimes allergies are called hay fever. The name is misleading, because hay does not cause an allergic reaction. Attacks may be seasonal, usually in the spring and fall. Some patients may have attacks all year.

SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS

- Sneezing
- Runny nose with clear drainage
- Nasal congestion
- Itchy, red or watery eyes
- Dry throat
- Itching in the roof of the mouth
- Wheezing (sometimes).

CAUSES

The body's immune system produces antibodies that release a chemical called histamine. Histamine produces swelling and irritation in sensitive areas such as the nose, sinuses and eyes. Irritants such as smoke or strong odors can increase the sensitivity to allergens. Allergens causing allergic sensitivity include:

- Pollen from weeds, grasses and trees
- Animal dander
- House dust
- Mold.

TREATMENT

Allergies **cannot** be cured, but can be controlled with treatment. Some medications are available by prescription and must be prescribed by a physician, while other medications are available without a prescription.

- Antihistamines help to relieve the sneezing, itchy eyes and runny nose by blocking the effects of histamine
- Decongestants can be used to relieve the stuffy nose (congestion) by shrinking swollen membranes
- Steroids can be sprayed into the nasal passages and may be prescribed to reduce nasal inflammation, swelling and mucus production
- Cromolyn sodium is sprayed into the nasal passages to prevent the allergic reaction from taking place
- Allergy shots for severe or continuous symptoms may be considered. This is a long-term treatment (months to years) and may not be effective for everyone.

RISK FACTORS

- Medical history of allergic reactions
- Exposure to cigarette smoke
- Family history of allergies
- Spring and fall seasons.

PREVENTIVE MEASURES

Avoid contact with the offending allergens:

- Pollens
 - Limit outdoor activity, especially when the pollen count is high
 - Keep windows closed
 - Use air-conditioning to filter the air
- Dust mites
 - Keep the house as dust-free as possible
 - Use synthetic bedding
 - Avoid overstuffed, upholstered furniture, thick shag carpets and heavy drapes
- Mold spores
 - Reduce humidity in the home with exhaust fans or a dehumidifier
 - Use household cleaners that eliminate mold
- Animal dander
 - Avoid contact with furry or feathered animals (cats, dogs, birds)
- Smoke and other irritants
 - Avoid tobacco smoke
 - Avoid smoke from wood fires
 - Avoid chemical fumes.

CONSIDER NOTIFYING YOUR PHYSICIAN IF YOU DEVELOP:

- Severe symptoms that are interfering with your normal activities
- Signs of infection such as fever, chills, headache, green or bloody nasal discharge or muscle aches
- New, unexplained symptoms.