

Allergy Basics

Tens of millions of people suffer from allergies because their immune systems are overly sensitive to pollen, dust mites, foods or other substances called allergens.



The good news is that you don't have to suffer needlessly. A combination of awareness, prevention and treatment can help you enjoy life more fully.

How Allergies Can Make You Sick

Common conditions related to allergies:

Hay fever. Also known as allergic rhinitis, hay fever is an inflammation of the lining of the nose, triggered by pollen and other substances. Hay fever can be mistaken for a cold.

Asthma. This chronic respiratory disorder is characterized by difficult breathing due to a constricted and inflamed airway. Triggers can include pollen, mold, dander, dust mites and cockroach droppings.

Dermatitis. Also called eczema, this is a chronic but not dangerous skin disorder. Common symptoms include dry, itchy, rashlike redness and inflammation.

Hay Fever or Cold?

Symptoms	Hay Fever	Cold
Nasal discharge	Thin, watery, clear discharge	Thick, yellow to green
Itching	In ears, eyes, nose or throat	Rare
Sneezing	Severe, prolonged spells	Only occasional
Symptom duration	Continue, occur most of year	Last 7-10 days

Prevention and Relief

Take 5 for Prevention

Many allergens enter the body through inhaling or touching, so reducing your exposure is important.

U Clean house. Thoroughly clean air-conditioning vents and ducts to help reduce allergens. Bleach moldy surfaces and fix water leaks. If cleaning triggers your allergies, get some help with chores.

V Note the pollen counts. Check weather reports and stay indoors more when counts are high. Also, keep windows closed. Using a dehumidifier to reduce indoor humidity can help too.

W Launder well. Wash bedding weekly in water that is hotter than 130 F. Dry clothes in a dryer, rather than outside.

X Practice pet control. Keep pets off furniture and out of your bedroom.

Y Wash away. Wash hands frequently to remove allergens such as pollen. Shower before bed to reduce transfer of allergens to bedding.



Allergy Management

Antihistamines. Nonsedating oral and nasal spray antihistamines can be used to treat hay fever. These are available over the counter and by prescription. Antihistamines are best taken before exposure to triggers. **Safety note:** Antihistamines can cause drowsiness.

Decongestants. Available in pills, liquid or nasal spray, decongestants help relieve stuffy nose. A combination antihistamine-decongestant may be more effective than either alone.

Corticosteroids. These are anti-inflammatory medications used to treat many allergic disorders, including hay fever, asthma and eczema. Pills and inhalers can treat respiratory disorders such as asthma; topical creams or ointments can relieve skin allergies.

Mast cell stabilizers. Nonsteroidal medications, such as cromolyn and nedocromil, prevent release of inflammatory chemicals for both hay fever and asthma.

Allergy shots. Also known as immunotherapy, allergy shots are intended to help the body develop immunity to the allergens involved in hay fever, asthma and insect stings. Immunity building can take months to years. Consider this option if you can't avoid triggers or if medications don't bring relief.



What About Food Allergies?



Food allergy is not common in adults or children, but it can be serious in some people. Symptoms may include itching in the mouth, vomiting, diarrhea or stomach pain, hives, eczema, or asthma.

Eight foods account for most food allergies: peanuts, tree nuts (e.g., walnuts, cashews), fish, shellfish, milk, eggs, wheat and soy. Peanuts in particular can cause a severe allergic reaction, called anaphylaxis. Strict avoidance is the only proven remedy for food allergy. **Good news:** Food manufacturers are required to list possible allergy-inducing ingredients, so read food packages carefully.

Seek a proper diagnosis if you suspect food allergy.

