When Allergies Attack

Scratch. Sniffle. Sneeze. If you suffer from allergies, you’re not alone. About 1 in 5 Americans have allergies.¹ For some, allergy symptoms are just a nuisance, but for many they can impact their quality of life. Severe reactions can even be deadly.² Fortunately, there are ways to manage your allergies and plan ahead in case of a serious reaction.

**Why do allergies happen?**
It all starts in your body’s immune system. When you’re allergic to something, your immune system mistakes an otherwise harmless substance for a harmful invader of your body. Your immune system reacts to this invader — the allergen — by creating an allergic reaction.³

**What allergens are lurking out there?**
Here are some of the most common substances that people may be allergic to:
- Pollen⁴
- Mold
- Animal and pet dander
- Dust
- Food
- Medicines
- Insect stings
- Latex

**Could it be allergies?**
Allergy symptoms can show up in different ways. How you react may depend in part on what you’re allergic to and how you’ve come into contact with that allergen.³ Here are some of the most common kinds of allergic reactions:
- **Allergic rhinitis** — Also known as hay fever or seasonal allergies. Symptoms may include a stuffy or runny nose and sneezing.
- **Allergic asthma** — This happens when allergens bring on asthma symptoms, such as coughing, shortness of breath and wheezing.
- **Urticaria** — Also known as hives, this causes itchy, white bumps on the skin with a red, inflamed area around it.
- **Contact dermatitis** — This happens when an allergen comes in direct contact with your skin and causes a rash.
- **Allergic conjunctivitis** — With symptoms such as itchy, watery eyes, this is the most common kind of allergic reaction in the eyes.⁶
How do I know if I have allergies?

Maybe you’ve confused your allergy symptoms with a cold. Perhaps you’re wondering if you’ve outgrown an old allergy. Or maybe you’re wondering if it’s safe to bring a new cat home. If you’re not sure whether you’re allergic to a substance or not, your doctor or an allergist can help.

First, he or she will ask you about your personal and medical history. Together, you’ll discuss your symptoms and their possible causes. Then the doctor will perform a physical exam. Depending on your symptoms, he or she may focus on your eyes, nose, ear, chest, throat and skin. In some cases, your doctor may also recommend allergy testing. Skin testing is the most frequently performed test to help figure out what your allergens might be. A blood test may also be done, but is not used routinely.

How can I treat or control my allergies?

If your doctor identifies that you are allergic to a substance, you can work together on a plan to help prevent future reactions and/or treat your symptoms. That plan may involve one or all of these strategies:

1. Avoid your allergens. Depending on what you’re allergic to, it may help to keep windows and doors closed and use air conditioning; avoid being outside when pollen counts are high; keep indoor humidity under 50 percent; fix any leaky pipes and use exhaust fans to minimize moisture; keep pets out of the bedroom; limit use of carpets and rugs; vacuum using a High-Efficiency Particulate Air (HEPA) filter and dust with a damp rag frequently; or cover your mattresses and pillows with dust-proof covers.

2. Take your medicine. The most commonly used medicines are antihistamines, many of which are available over the counter. Some antihistamines may have a sedating effect. Other medications, depending on your symptoms, may include decongestants, eye drops for itching or burning eyes, cromolyn products and corticosteroids. Corticosteroids may be given as a nasal spray, inhaler, injection, cream or ointment, eye drops, by mouth or via injection. Some creams and ointments are available over the counter; others require prescriptions. Remember, before using any over-the-counter medications, be sure to read all package labels to make sure they are safe for you. Talk to your doctor or pharmacist if you have any questions or a medical condition.

3. Get your allergy shots. If avoiding your triggers and taking your medicine doesn’t work for you, your doctor may suggest allergy shots to help you prevent allergy symptoms.

Severe reactions are an emergency.

If you have an extreme reaction (anaphylaxis), you may feel a number of symptoms, including: the feeling of impending doom; difficulty breathing; wheezing; widespread hives; swelling of the lips, tongue, throat or eyes; trouble swallowing; lightheadedness; chest tightness; fast heart rate; and shock. These symptoms usually develop within minutes to hours after an exposure and can become dangerous very quickly. If you develop any of these symptoms, call 911 right away, and use a medicine called epinephrine if it has been prescribed to you. A severe reaction can even lead to death.

Contact your Onsite Health Specialist for more information on allergy resources.

HelpCare Advisor is also available for your health care needs and questions!

1-855-583-3165 [TTY: 711]
https://client.myoptumhealth.com/takecharge

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Sources:

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