



Allergic Rhinitis (Hay Fever)

Allergic (uh-ler-jik) rhinitis (ri-ni-tis), also called hay fever, is a condition in which the nose and respiratory passages overreact to contact with certain substances that are in the air. It is most commonly caused by pollens, pets, and dust, and sometimes by molds and cockroaches. It often occurs in people who have other family members with allergies (allergic rhinitis, asthma, and eczema). There is not a cure for this problem, but there are many treatments that can help you feel better.

Symptoms of allergic rhinitis include:

- Nose - sneezing (often several times in a row), runny and stuffy nose, and itching.
- Eyes - itching, watering, and swelling
- Throat – itching of the roof of the mouth
- Other – sinus pressure, ear fullness and popping, cough, fatigue

Diagnosis of allergic rhinitis is primarily made from the history and timing of the symptoms. Physical exam of the nose and face can help in the diagnosis. Allergy tests are expensive and are reserved for those who may need desensitization shots (see below) or certain other clinical situations. There are 2 basic types of allergy tests. RAST tests are blood tests that are very accurate if they are positive, but which can “miss” allergies. Skin tests are more likely to pick up allergies, but may be positive in people who do not have any symptoms to that particular substance.

Treatments

Avoidance of the substances that cause your allergy can be very helpful, although sometimes this is difficult to do. See below for more specific details on this subject.

Antihistamines are very useful for the symptoms of allergic rhinitis. Over-the-counter antihistamines such as chlorpheniramine (Chlor- trimeton®), diphenhydramine (Benadryl®), and clemastine (Tavist®) are inexpensive, readily available, and work well but can frequently cause drowsiness and are likely to impair school performance and driving.

There are non-sedating antihistamines that are available over the counter, Claritin® (loratidine), or by prescription (e.g. Allegra®, Zyrtec®), which are moderately expensive. There is one prescription antihistamine nasal spray (Astelin®).

Decongestants are used to help the stuffy and runny nose, sinus pressure, and clogged ears. Pseudoephedrine (Sudafed®) and phenylephrine (many products) are the most commonly used oral decongestants. Often decongestants are combined with antihistamines to increase the symptom relief. Side effects that can occur are jitteriness and insomnia. Pseudoephedrine must be signed for at the pharmacy because it has been used illegally to make methamphetamine, but it is a better decongestant than phenylephrine. Over-the-counter decongestant nasal sprays are occasionally used for allergy symptoms but should not be used for more than 3 days due to risks of the nose becoming dependent on them (causing *worsening* nasal congestion).

Steroid (Cortisone) nasal sprays are prescription medications that are very helpful for allergic rhinitis. They are much more effective than antihistamines and decongestants. They are used preventatively since it can take several days to start to work and up to 2 weeks to reach full effectiveness. They are, therefore, to be used everyday through the allergy season (year-round if needed). These are not the unsafe “body building” steroids. They have few side effects and are very safe but moderately expensive. Read the package insert carefully to use it correctly.



Cortisone pills and shots are sometimes used to help allergy symptoms for people who have a short period of time when their symptoms are bothersome or to help severe symptoms until other treatments (such as the safer steroid nasal sprays) take effect. They have many side effects when used for long periods of time.

Nasal saline irrigation uses a stream of saline squirted up into the nasal passages. It is effective for removing the mucus in the nose and sinuses and can be performed several times per day. It is helpful for removing pollens and pollutants. Look for the nasal saline in the drug store that can be used as a stream of fluid. If using nasal cortisone spray, use saline prior to use or wait a few hours after use so as not to wash the medicated spray away.

Desensitization ("allergy shots") is usually reserved for those who do not have good results with the above treatments. They work well in many allergy patients but are expensive, time-consuming, and have rare risks of severe allergic reactions.

How to avoid things that make your allergies worse

Dust – A microscopic organism called dust mite is the cause of dust allergy. Dust mites live in bedding, mattresses, upholstered furniture, carpet, and other dust-collecting sites of your home. They thrive in hot humid weather but usually cause most symptoms in the fall when we close our windows and keep the dust mite trapped in the house.

- Cover your mattress, pillow, box spring, and non-washable comforters in special dust-proof covers (widely available).
- Wash sheets and blankets weekly.
- Reduce household humidity to less than 50%.
- Vacuum carpets and rugs once or twice a week with a double-layered or microfiltered vacuum bag, or a vacuum cleaner with a HEPA filter.
- Avoid carpet in the bedroom, especially the thick-piled type.
- Get rid of stuffed animals *or* wash them weekly *or* put them in a plastic bag in the freezer to kill the dust mite.
- Install a whole-house air filter that effectively removes dust mite. HEPA filters are best, but there are disposable micropore filters that are less expensive and do an acceptable job. Room air filters are not very useful.

Animal dander – the cause of this allergy is a protein in the skin, saliva and urine of furry pets.

- Keep furry pets out of the bedroom at all times and outdoors if possible.
- Use HEPA or micropore air filters and vacuum cleaners.
- Bathe pets and wash bedding weekly.

Pollen and outdoor molds – Trees (April to mid May), grass (mid May to July), and weeds (July to October) are the primary causes of pollen allergies. Molds can be a problem in humid weather and in the fall when leaves and vegetation are wet. Flowering plants usually are not a problem since they have much less pollen. Pollen counts are often highest in the morning and on dry windy days.

- Stay indoors with windows closed and the air conditioner running when pollen counts are highest.
- Avoid mowing the lawn and raking leaves or wear a mask.

Smoke, strong odors, and sprays – These do not actually cause allergies, but can be irritating and make the symptoms of allergic rhinitis worse.

- Do not allow smoking in your home or around you.
- Do not use a wood burning stove, kerosene heater, or fireplace.
- Try to stay away from perfume, talcum powder, hair spray, and paints.

Sources for more information:

American Academy of Allergy, Asthma and Immunology

1-800-822-ASMA

<http://www.aaaai.org>

Asthma and Allergy Foundation of America

1-800-7-ASTHMA

<http://www.aafa.org>

