

# Respiratory Allergies

More than 30 percent of Americans suffer from some kind of allergic disorder. Ten percent experience significant respiratory symptoms, which may include:

- Sneezing
- Persistent nasal congestion
- Watery nasal discharge
- Post nasal drip
- Itching of the nose, throat, eyes
- Persistent cough
- Dryness/irritation of the throat

A wide variety of substances can cause respiratory allergies. Some of the more common substances include pollens, dusts, animal dander, molds, spores, and ragweed. An allergic reaction begins when particles are inhaled and come in contact with the mucous membranes of the nose. These substances cause itching, swelling, and increased mucus production that eventually block the airways, if the person is sensitive or "allergic" to them.

The severity of respiratory symptoms can vary greatly among individuals. Some people experience only seasonal flare-ups, while others have symptoms year round. Symptoms can be mild or severe enough to lead to loss of sleep or appetite and can cause fatigue and irritability. Sometimes respiratory allergies can develop into sinusitis, a condition with all the symptoms mentioned above, plus headache, facial or dental pain, and sore throat. The following section lists signs indicating the need for further evaluation.

Fever or muscle and joint aches are not allergy symptoms and can be the signs of a bacterial or viral infection, which may require medical attention.

## SEEKING MEDICAL ATTENTION

You should seek medical attention if you experience:

- Wheezing and shortness of breath
- Persistent cough with or without mucus expectoration
- Coughing for prolonged period which occurs only at night and may keep you awake or lead to vomiting.
- Yellow or green discharge from the nose accompanied by headache or dental pain
- Yellow or green discharge from the eyes with visual disturbances
- Swelling of the eyelids

## PREVENTION & CONTROL

The most effective means for controlling allergies is to avoid exposure to the offending substances. The following precautions may be taken:

**Remove pets from the home.** Pets' dander (skin flakes) and outdoor pollens on their coats make them carriers of several allergens (substances that can cause allergic reactions).

**Cover mattresses and pillows** with rubber or plastic covers. Use pillows with non-allergenic fiber fillers. Use blinds in bedrooms instead of fabric drapes.

**Dust rooms (especially bedrooms) often** with a damp cloth or mop. Be sure to dust floors, baseboards, walls, and furniture.

**Avoid chemical irritants** such as tobacco smoke, vaporous products such as hair spray and spray deodorant, and perfumes, including perfumed soaps and cosmetics. These items can irritate the linings of the nose and throat. Perfumes can cause severe headaches.

**Avoid exposure to potted plants.** The soil can provide an environment for mold to grow.

**Avoid exposure to rooms with damp walls,** such as basements where moisture collects and molds can grow.

**Humidify air** to prevent mucous membranes from drying out.

**Avoid outdoor plants,** such as chrysanthemums or ragweed.

**Use synthetic blankets.**

## SELF CARE

Medications to relieve minor allergic symptoms are available over-the-counter (not requiring a prescription). They work best when there is also a decrease in allergens in the environment.

**Antihistamines** (e.g. Claritin® and Benadryl®):

- Relieve many of the symptoms of allergies such as itching, runny nose, and post nasal drip.
- May cause drowsiness and a sense of dryness in the mouth and throat.
- Counteract the effects of histamine, which is produced by your body as a result of an allergy.

**Decongestants** (e.g., Sudafed®)

- Decrease the blood flow through nasal mucous, thereby relieving the "stuffed-up" feeling
- Helpful as an addition to an antihistamine.

*Note:* Many over-the-counter medications are combination medicines that contain both an antihistamine and a decongestant (e.g., Actifed®, Chlortrimeton Decongestant®, and Dimetapp Extentabs®).

**Nasal Sprays** (e.g., Afrin® & Neo-Synephrin®)

- Should be avoided because prolonged use can actually make the symptoms worse.

**Cool Compresses To The Eyes**

- Help relieve the itching and reduce the redness when done several times a day.

## TREATMENT

When symptoms cannot be relieved by use of over-the-counter medications or by decreasing the exposure to allergens, further medical treatment is indicated. Your UHS primary care provider can prescribe a medication or make a referral to an allergist, a medical doctor specializing in allergy and immunology. The allergist can evaluate whether allergy injections would be effective in decreasing allergy symptoms. Injections work by gradually desensitizing the person to the known specific allergen over a period of time. If necessary, skin testing for specific allergies would be done by the allergist.

## SCHEDULING AN APPOINTMENT

Call 275-2662 to schedule an appointment at the University Health Service (UHS). UHS offers a full range of services. All visits to UHS are confidential.

## LINKS

WEB MD

[http://my.webmd.com/content/article/9/1680\\_50319?src=Inktomi&condition=Health%20Topics%20A-Z](http://my.webmd.com/content/article/9/1680_50319?src=Inktomi&condition=Health%20Topics%20A-Z)

Yahoo Health

<http://health.yahoo.com/health/centers/allergy/151.html>