

Allergies

More than half of all Americans suffer from allergies, and the numbers are increasing. No matter the severity of symptoms, it's important to know what is causing the allergies and the options for treatment.

Allergy symptoms appear when chemical mediators, such as histamine, are released into the bloodstream. These chemicals are byproducts of the body's antibodies fighting off allergens. Anything substance that triggers an allergic reaction can be an allergen, but some substances are more prone to generate an allergic response in humans. Common allergens include airborne pollens, food, mold, dust, feathers, animal dander, chemicals and environmental pollutants.

Allergy symptoms may include itchy eyes, sneezing, nasal stuffiness, nasal congestion and drainage, and headaches. Some less common symptoms include skin irritation, respiratory problems and asthma. Generally, inhaled allergens will cause respiratory symptoms, and ingested allergies will produce skin and/or gastrointestinal symptoms.

Some allergens that are always present, like dust mites, pet dander, mold, food and household chemicals, can cause allergy sufferers to experience symptoms year-round. Other allergens, such as ragweed, grasses and tree pollens, occur seasonally and allow sufferers a break in the off-season.

To determine which allergens are triggering allergies, an allergist or immunologist can safely and effectively test a person's skin or blood. The most common type of allergy test is the prick technique. The prick technique makes a small puncture through a drop of the allergen extract on the skin. The body releases mediators to fight the antibodies, which causes redness and swelling only in the spots where the allergen was introduced. Therefore, the red, swollen spot indicates which allergen a person is allergic to. The results are usually available within 15 minutes.

Medications like antihistamines and nasal decongestant spray, steroid spray and saline spray are useful in treating allergy systems. If allergy symptoms don't improve with medications or the medication side effects are too severe, allergy shots, or immunotherapy, may be a good option. The goal of these shots is to desensitize the body to specific allergens and decrease or eliminate the need for medications over a period of three to five years.

There are many ways that you can limit your exposure to allergens by taking steps to control your environment including:

- Wear a mask (sold at most drugstores) when mowing grass or cleaning the house.
- Change A/C and heating air filters monthly or install an air purifier.
- Close windows and doors during heavy pollen seasons.
- Don't allow dander-producing animals like cats or dogs in your house.
- Get rid of mildew sources including indoor plants.
- Trade your feather pillows and woolen blankets to synthetic materials.
- Consider using a humidifier in the winter because dry, indoor heat can aggravate many people's allergies.

Plus, it's always good to observe good general health practices by exercising daily, not smoking, and eating a balanced diet supplemented with vitamins, especially vitamin C.