

# Allergy Information Factsheet

## *Doctor, Please Explain Allergies and Allergic Rhinitis (Hay Fever)*

Millions of people (one out of five) suffer from nasal allergies, commonly known as hay fever. Often fragrant flowers are blamed for the uncomfortable symptoms, yet they are rarely the cause; their pollens are too heavy to be airborne. An ear, nose, and throat specialist can help determine the substances causing your discomfort and develop a management plan that will help make life more enjoyable.

### **What is an allergy?**

An allergy is your body's reaction to something in your environment. Have you ever started sneezing as soon as you enter an office filled with dusty files or on dusting the house? Have you ever visited a friend's house and started sneezing as soon as the pet dog ran up to give you a big wet kiss? Have you had a rash, or a red splotch, on your skin after using a particular kind of soap? These are types of allergic reaction.

### **What is rhinitis?**

Rhinitis is the term for what occurs when the inside of your nose swells and hurts.

So.....

When you pet your friend's dog or play outside and you sneeze and your nose starts to run, you have allergic rhinitis. Read on to find out why this happens, and what you can do to help stop it.

### **Why does the body develop allergies?**

There are two causes of allergic rhinitis: First, if your father or mother is allergic to stuff like dust and dogs, you are more likely to have allergies too than someone whose family does not have allergies. Second, your body reacts to exposure to allergens. An **allergen** is anything that causes an allergic reaction in you.

### **What allergens should be avoided?**

You might have allergies if you sneeze when you get around these things (allergens):

- Dust mites (tiny bugs you can't see) that live in your home
- Proteins from furry pets, which are found in their dander, saliva and urine (it's actually not their hair)
- Molds in your home or in the air outside

- Tree, grass and weed pollens
- Cockroach body parts and droppings
- Bird feathers or droppings.

Chemicals and environmental pollutants are not allergens but commonly cause many to suffer allergic reactions due to their irritant nature. If you have strong allergen sensitivity and chronic low dose exposure to the allergen, e.g., house dust mite or cockroach, you will not notice immediate symptoms at home, but will notice symptoms from irritants (due to a nonspecific nasal hyperactivity) like smoke, cold air and perfumes. You will then assume these are the allergens, when they are merely secondary irritant triggers.

### **Why do allergies make me sneeze and wheeze?**

When you are allergic to something, your immune system, which normally tries to keep you healthy by fighting bad bacteria or germs in your body gets confused and thinks a good allergen is actually a bad germ. Because your immune system's job is to kill germs, it attacks the allergen and tries to get rid of it. So, allergy symptoms appear when the immune system reacts to an allergic substance that has entered the body as though it was an unwelcomed invader. The result of this reaction is the release of chemicals in the nasal passages, eyes or airways which causes inflammation and irritation to the lining of the eyes, nose and throat. This reaction causes us to sneeze, makes our eyes water, and causes our noses to run.

### **How do I know I have allergies?**

Sometimes it can be hard to tell whether you have allergies or just a bad cold. Here's a quick way to find out: do your eyes, nose, or throat itch? Then you probably have allergies.

Do you think you might have allergies? If you have had any of these symptoms (A symptom is a condition of your body that is not normal, and may be a signal that something is wrong.) for over two weeks, you are likely to have allergic rhinitis:

- Itchy, watery eyes
- Runny itchy nose
- Excessive sneezing
- 'Stuffed up' nose and occasional headaches due to nasal and sinus congestion
- Sore throat or itchy throat
- Skin hives
- Shortness of breath, etc.



### **How do I know what I am allergic to? What Allergy Tests are available?**

The most useful tool in deciding whether someone is allergic is to take an 'allergy history'. Skin prick test can provide useful confirmatory evidence for a diagnosis made on clinical grounds. Allergy testing analyzed by an allergist can pinpoint what you are allergic to. Allergy tests, combined with the knowledge of your allergy specialist to interpret them, can give precise information about what you are and are not allergic to. For instance, if you wheeze when you are at home and don't know why, you don't have to get rid of your dog if your allergy testing shows you are allergic to dust mites but not dogs. With this information, you and your allergist can develop a treatment plan to manage or even get rid of your symptoms. A carefully performed and correctly interpreted prick test with a concentrated extract of high quality allergen is a simple, quick, practically painless and safe method with a high degree of specificity and sensitivity. Therefore prick testing with a battery of routine allergens is still the first and basic procedure in diagnosing allergic diseases.

Blood tests to measure the amount of specific IgE using RAST technique are particularly useful when the patient has a risk of severe allergic reaction, when extensive eczema makes skin prick testing impractical, when antihistamine medication cannot be stopped because of severe symptoms. However, these are expensive and not available for all the allergens. RAST tests for particular allergens may be appropriate in those patients who present with a good history of sensitivity to a particular allergen, and yet produce consistently negative skin test results. Skin tests are generally considered to be more sensitive than RAST assay. Some blood tests for allergy screenings performed by ELISA technique at certain laboratories are non-specific and not helpful.

### **How can nasal allergy disturb me?**

Rhinitis is often regarded as a trivial problem but studies have shown that it severely affects people's quality of life. It disturbs sleep, impairs daytime concentration and the ability to carry out tasks (decreased work efficiency), causes people to miss work or school, and has been shown to affect pupil's school exam results. Allergies are rarely life threatening, but allergies cannot be considered a minor problem.

People who suffer rhinitis are at increased risk of developing asthma. Inflammation at one end of the airway (the nose) often spreads to the other end (the lungs), as this has led to the 'one airway' approach to treatment. Asthmatics who also suffer rhinitis have less severe asthma and less emergency hospital admissions if their rhinitis is treated effectively.

For some allergy sufferers symptoms may be seasonal, but for others it is a year-round discomfort. The patient who is allergic to tree, grass and weed pollens may suffer during a particular 'hayfever' season. Rhinitis which occurs for only part of the year in this way is called **seasonal allergic rhinitis**. Symptoms that continue all year are called **perennial allergic rhinitis** and commonly relate to indoor allergens, such as house dust mites, pets and indoor moulds.

## **When should an ENT doctor be consulted?**

Most people with nagging allergy symptoms don't realize how much better they can feel once their symptoms are properly diagnosed and treated. The most appropriate person to evaluate allergy problems is an otolaryngologist (ear, nose, and throat specialist). Aside from gathering a detailed history and completing a thorough examination of the ears, nose, throat, head, and neck, the doctor will offer advice on proper environmental control and evaluate the sinuses to determine if infection or structural abnormality (deviated septum, polyps) is contributing to the symptoms.

In addition, the doctor may advise testing to confirm whether you actually have allergy and to determine the specific allergen that is causing discomfort. Allergen identification, avoidance, and environmental control should be as important in the overall management plan for allergic rhinitis as drug therapy and patient education.

Doctor can suggest medications, including antihistamines tablets and nasal decongestant/steroid sprays that can be helpful. If these medicines work, you're home free. If not, as in some cases, immunotherapy or allergy shots may be recommended. Immunotherapy is a unique treatment because it induces the build up of protective antibodies to specific allergens.

The right care can make the difference between suffering with an allergic disease and feeling better. By visiting the office of an allergist, you can expect an accurate diagnosis, a treatment plan that works and educational information to help you manage your disease.

The contents of this brochure are for informational purposes only. It is not intended to replace evaluation by a physician. If you have questions or medical concerns, please contact your allergist/immunologist.