



Wake Internal Medicine Consultants, Inc.

Allergy Sufferers Guide





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Oh no! Here comes the dreaded allergy season and with it the scratchy throats, runny eyes and a whole lot of misery. Before we get into the causes and alternate treatments for allergies, take note of this simple list of ways to potentially avoid allergy flare-ups.



20 Quick Steps to Surviving Allergies:

1. Don't smoke and don't let others smoke in your home.
2. Keep windows and doors closed during high pollen activity.
3. Remove carpet and draperies from your home. They attract and collect dust.
4. If you are allergic to pet dander, sorry, but you may have to say goodbye to pets who shed excessively. If that is not an option, make sure you bathe and brush your pets on a weekly basis.
5. Filter out the allergens in your home with a HEPA[®] air filter.
6. Remove laundry from the washer as soon as its done to avoid the growth of mold.



7. Limit your use of common household cleaners that may trigger allergic reactions. Opt for all natural cleaners... vinegar is a wonder cleaner. Use it mixed with water to clean most any surface in your home (always test first).

8. When riding in a car, make sure the windows are up.

9. Limit outdoor activity and steer clear of areas with excessive tree growth.

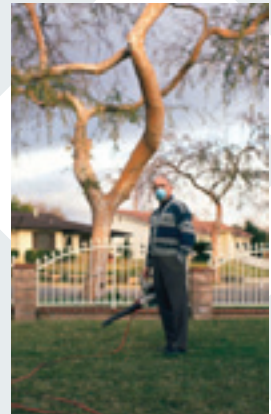
10. If you have food allergies, make sure you read food labels very carefully.

11. If you have a food allergy and are eating out, make sure you talk to the waiter and alert him/her to the allergy so they can instruct as to whether you may have a problem with a certain dish.

12. Install an exhaust fan over the kitchen stove to filter out allergens.

13. If you are doing yard work, use a mask to cover your face to avoid breathing in allergens.

14. Make sure your home stays clear of mice and cockroaches. They provoke allergy and asthma symptoms.





15. Keep your home dusted on a regular basis, preferably with a microfiber cloth versus a sponge. Sponges can carry excessive amounts of germs. If you do use a sponge, place it regularly in a microwave on high for 10 seconds.

16. Use a humidifier but make sure you clean it according to the directions. Dirty mist can lead to lung problems and people with allergies are more prone to these problems.

17. Don't go overboard with houseplants. They can grow mold in the soil.

18. Wash bedding once a week in very hot water to zap the dust allergy triggers.

19. Stay out of basements and attics. If you do use them, put a dehumidifier in them. Mold can grow quickly in damp areas.

20. Place floor mats throughout the house in strategic areas to reduce the amount of dust and dirt carried in from outside.





You may ask why you have to do these things to keep from sneezing and being generally miserable. Read on for a more in-depth look at allergies, how they occur and what you can do to medically treat them if the above steps don't help.



What Are Allergies?

Simply put, an allergy is a response by your body's immune system to something it feels is harmful to it. The immune system then "overreacts" to harmful substances or allergens, such as pollen, pet dander, dust mites, mold or toxins.

How Do Allergies Occur?

Every day your body is exposed to millions of potentially microscopic invaders. Usually the body protects against these invaders, but sometimes the immune system can go a little haywire. When an allergen gets into your system and your body signals that it is under attack, it releases what is called histamine from cells in your body. The release of histamine can make your eyes water, nose run, make you sneeze and wheeze and even cause breathing problems. In short, an allergic reaction is born.



What Causes an Allergic Reaction?

There are a variety of substances that can cause allergic reactions. Some of the most common are:

- Pollen
- Mold
- Animal dander
- Dust and dust mites
- Certain medications
- Insect bites
- Foods – some of the more common food allergies are:
 - Eggs
 - Peanuts
 - Milk
 - Soy
 - Tree nuts
 - Wheat
 - Shellfish
(shrimp, crab, lobster, snails, clams)

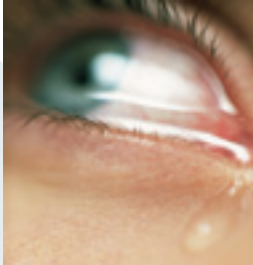




What Are the Symptoms of Allergies?



While every person can experience different reactions to different allergens, some of the more common symptoms are:

- Sneezing – the body’s method of expelling an irritant
 - Runny or stuffy nose – chemicals are released that cause the vessels in the nose to leak, thereby expelling mucus. Those same chemicals can cause the nose vessels to enlarge, causing congestion.
 - Itchy eyes, nose and throat
 - “Allergic shiners” – dark circles under the eyes caused by congestion
 - Watery eyes and red-rimmed eyelids are common in four out of ten allergy sufferers.
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- Inflamed nostrils
 - Nasal voice
 - Noisy breathing
 - Snoring
 - Fatigue
 - Itchy skin
 - Dry throat
 - Wheezing
 - Nausea
 - Headaches
 - Frequent nosebleeds
 - Sinus infections
 - Cough
 - Rash or hives
 - Stomach cramps
 - Diarrhea

You may have only a couple of these symptoms or many, but the best way to determine the severity of your allergic reaction is to talk to your physician.



What Triggers Allergies?

As stated earlier, the immune system overreacts to a substance called an allergen. One needs to be exposed more than once to an allergen to trigger a reaction. It can take weeks, months or even years of exposure before your body becomes “sensitized” to that allergen. Your body then believes it is under attack and wages war against the allergen.



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There are two types of nasal allergies, seasonal and perennial. Seasonal allergies, also known as hay fever, occur at a specific time of the year. Grass, tree and weed pollens are the most common triggers of these allergies.

Perennial allergies have symptoms that do not change throughout the year. The substances are present constantly and can include cockroaches, pet dander, mold spores and dust mites.

How Are Allergies Diagnosed?



When you visit your doctor, he or she will ask about your history of symptoms and examine you. To fully determine what is triggering your symptoms, the doctor will administer skin scratch or prick tests. A tiny amount of an allergen is placed under your skin and your doctor will look for reactions to these tiny pricks.



In some cases, a blood test will be given to help find your trigger. Food allergies also may be determined in a different way. You may be asked to eliminate certain foods from your diet to determine if that food is, in fact, the allergy trigger. These foods will be reintroduced to your diet to see if an allergic reaction occurs.



What Is the Treatment For Allergies?

In some cases, the allergy is quite mild and no treatment will be required. In other cases, your doctor may suggest one or more of the following:



Decongestants – these medications are used to decrease nasal congestion by causing blood vessel narrowing. Some over-the-counter examples are Sudafed[®], Dristan[®] and Vicks Sinex[®]. Afrin[®] is a popular nasal

decongestant but it should be noted that nasal sprays should be used no more than three days at a time. Any longer and the condition can worsen.

Antihistamines - these medicines work by blocking histamine receptors and thereby shrinking blood vessels and alleviating redness, itching and mucus secretion. Over-the-counter options include Claritin[®], Zyrtec[®] and Benedryl[®] while prescription options include Allegra[®] and Clarinex[®].



Nasal steroids are anti-inflammatory medications that block production of the cells in the body that cause allergic symptoms. A prescription is required to obtain these medications. Common brands are Flonase[®], Nasonex[®] and Veramyst[®].



Inhaled bronchodilators are generally used for asthma sufferers and are used to open bronchial tubes so that more air can move through. They also are able to help clear mucus from the lungs. A prescription is needed for these medications.



Allergy shots increase the ability for your body to tolerate allergens gradually over a sustained period of time.

How Long Does an Allergic Reaction Last?

To answer this question, we need to address the two different types of allergies...food allergies and environmental allergies. Food allergies are usually outgrown by most children by the age of three. However, there are some classic examples of food allergies that can last a lifetime...peanuts, nuts, and shellfish. A food allergy reaction can last from several minutes to several hours depending on the amount of the food you have eaten and the severity of your allergy.



For environmental allergies, symptoms and reactions can last as long as that allergen is active and harmful to your immune system. For seasonal allergies, that means that early spring can bring a flare-up of your allergy to tree pollen.

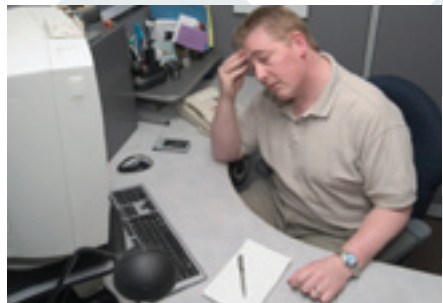
For others, late spring/early

summer can trigger allergies to grass pollens. Late summer/fall brings the dreaded ragweed season. Allergies to mold spores can affect people either seasonally or yearly. The best way to determine how long an allergic reaction will last is to determine exactly what it is you are allergic to.

Living with Severe Allergies

Millions of people suffer from environmental and food allergies every year, many considered mild to moderate. What that means is that you are able to avoid the allergens that affect you. One can also manage those reactions with over-the-counter medications or mild prescriptions. If you suffer from a food allergy, avoiding the food will prevent the reaction.

There is another group of allergy sufferers, though, that suffer symptoms so severe they can interfere with the quality of their lives. Severe allergy sufferers are 20 times more likely to miss school or work than a non-sufferer. Most





days they are too tired to be productive. Concentration is at a minimal level and allergy sufferers have a far greater chance than non-sufferers of being in an accident or having an injury. Managing and coping with allergies becomes a matter of day-to-day survival in these cases.



Here are some tips to dealing with these allergies:

Know your allergy!

It is imperative with severe allergies that you take the time and steps necessary to identify the allergens that are causing you distress. Go to a doctor and ask for a skin test or a blood test. Either of these tests will identify the allergen or, more typically, allergens that affect you.

Control the allergens!

Going back to the tips mentioned earlier, take the steps necessary to rid your environment of the offending allergens. If you are severely allergic to pet dander, steps must be taken to get the dander either out of the home or under control. The same would apply to dust mites and mold allergies.

Get proper help!

There are a myriad of medications available to control your allergies. See your doctor to determine which would be best for you. The treatment may be nasal steroids, a daily antihistamine, or immunotherapy for the most severe allergies. Many refer to immunotherapy as getting allergy shots. It is important to note that immunotherapy is not an option with food allergies because the sufferer may actually experience worse effects from the medication than the food allergen itself.



It is not uncommon to begin one medication and then, over time, feel the effectiveness taper off. That may lead ultimately to the need for allergy shots generally given twice a week for the first several months. Afterwards, injections are reduced to once a week for six months and then every 1-4 weeks for up to five years.



For severe reactions that cause anaphylaxis like bee stings, peanuts, shellfish, etc., avoiding offending agent is paramount. Sufferers are generally instructed to carry a device called an EpiPen® auto-injector that contains epinephrine and is used for injection the moment the allergen attacks. This injection can give the sufferer enough time to get to the hospital for further medical attention.



Your life does not have to come to a halt, regardless of the severity of your allergies. There are solutions, but it is imperative to follow the above steps. The most important step to take is to have your doctor diagnosis your allergy or allergies and prescribe treatment.

If allergies are causing you distress, contact your healthcare provider. They can answer many of the questions you have about allergies, determine the severity of your allergies and prescribe a treatment that can alleviate the discomfort you are experiencing.