The Asthma–Allergies Connection

Asthma is a condition that causes narrowing of the bronchial tubes in the lungs. People who have asthma may cough, wheeze and have trouble breathing. Asthma attacks — sudden breathlessness and wheezing — can be life threatening.

Not all asthma is allergy related, but asthma symptoms can be triggered by exposure to allergens, especially:

- Pollen
- Mold spores
- Dust mites
- Pet dander

Asthma is a chronic condition that requires medical care. Treatments include a combination of medication and self-care techniques such as allergen avoidance, exercise, keeping an asthma journal, dietary changes and stress management.

Remember: Every breath doesn't have to be a challenge. People who have allergies and allergy-induced asthma can lead normal, active lives. Learning what causes your symptoms and how to control them are good first steps toward finding relief.

What Is Immunotherapy?

In order to reduce allergy symptoms over the long term, some patients undergo "allergy shots" where they are injected with increasing concentrations of the allergens to which they are sensitive. Injections are usually given every week or two for up to three years. Allergy symptoms are permanently improved for some patients, while others experience a return of symptoms after the injections are stopped.

Allergy Drugs: Your Options

Nasal corticosteroids: Medicines, such as Nasonex or Flonase, that are sprayed into the nose once or twice a day to relieve allergy symptoms. They may cause stinging in nasal passages.

Oral antihistamines: Available both by prescription and over the counter. These drugs include diphenhydramine (Benadryl) and chlorpheniramine (Chlor-Trimeton) and counteract the production of histamine in the body. Drowsiness is a common side effect. Some prescription antihistamines (Claritin, Allegra, Zyrtec) only need to be taken once or twice a day and do not cause drowsiness.

Decongestants: Available in oral or nasal spray forms. By prescription or over the counter, these medicines work directly on nasal congestion and are often used with antihistamines. ***Caution:*** Prolonged use of decongestant nasal sprays may cause a "rebound effect" that results in even worse nasal congestion.

Bronchodilators: Used to open bronchial tubes in the lungs to relieve coughing, wheezing and shortness of breath. They can be inhaled, taken orally or injected and tend to cause side effects, including nervousness, restlessness, headache and insomnia.

Anti-inflammatory medications: Medications such as oral corticosteroids and cromolyn sodium. These drugs are sometimes prescribed to reduce swelling and irritation in the airway and lungs, reducing sensitivity to allergens and easing asthma symptoms.

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ALLERGIES
Your Guide to Breathing Easier

SAMPLE

A COMMON PROBLEM

Sneezing, itchy eyes, mouth and throat, wheezing, skin irritation, runny nose … for allergy sufferers, these symptoms are all too familiar. Allergy is more than a minor discomfort — it is a major cause of illness and lost work time, affecting as many as 50 million people in the U.S. alone. Pollen allergy, or hay fever, is the leading cause of allergy symptoms in the U.S., while people in the rest of the world have more allergies to airborne dust.

If you have allergies, it may seem that simply breathing in the air around you irritates your symptoms. Don't suffer in silence. Read on to learn more about how you can get relief.

What Is an Allergy?

An allergy is a hypersensitivity to a normally harmless substance, such as pollen, dust or animal dander.

What Causes an Allergic Reaction?

Your immune system defends your body against harmful agents such as viruses and infections. When a person has an allergy, the immune system attacks a substance that is not harmful to other people, such as dust or pollen. This causes an overproduction of chemicals such as **histamine,** resulting in allergy symptoms such as watery eyes and sneezing. Substances that cause allergy symptoms are called **allergens.**

Anaphylactic shock,

or anaphylaxis, is a severe reaction often caused by allergy to penicillin, certain foods such as nuts and shellfish, or stinging insects. It causes swelling in the throat and other tissues, vomiting, cramps and a sudden drop in blood pressure. Anaphylactic shock is life threatening. If you witness someone having a severe allergic reaction, **call for help immediately.** If you have an allergy that could result in anaphylaxis, wear a medical alert tag. You also need to carry an EpiPen (epinephrine, also known as adrenaline). It's the drug of choice for treatment.

10 Ways to Find Relief

Allergies can make you feel as though there is no place for you to find relief — your home, workplace and even the great outdoors are full of substances that can bring on an allergic reaction. Take these steps to protect yourself:

1. AVOID outdoor activity in the morning, when pollen levels are highest.
2. WEAR a facemask when working outdoors or in damp areas (such as a greenhouse) to reduce exposure to pollen, dust and mold.
3. CHOOSE vacation spots where pollen and allergies are lowest, such as the seashore.
4. CLEAN rugs, drapes and upholstery with a vacuum cleaner equipped with a special HEPA filter that removes allergens, especially if you have pet dander allergy and can't bear to part with your furry friend.
5. KEEP your home and workplace dust-free, and wear a facemask when cleaning.
6. WEAR rubber gloves when using cleaners or chemicals if you have skin allergies, and avoid changing your soap, shampoo and cosmetics.
7. BEWARE of damp basements, closets and attics if you have mold allergy. Use a bathroom shower cleaner that kills mildew. Remove houseplants and keep moisture-containing items such as the refrigerator drip tray and humidifier clean.
8. SLEEP easier by using mattresses, pillows and upholstery made of materials that do not encourage mold growth, or enclose them in non-allergenic plastic covers.
9. USE an air conditioner at home and in your car to keep allergens from entering through open windows, and change filters frequently; also consider an air-filtering device that removes airborne allergens from your home or workspace.
10. GET tested. Talk with your doctor about getting blood tests or skin tests performed to find out exactly what you are allergic to.

Cold or Allergy?

There are important differences between cold and allergy symptoms. A cold …

- Is often accompanied by a fever and chills
- Produces mucus that is yellow or green
- Has a progression of symptoms and lasts 3–10 days

Allergies normally produce clear nasal discharge, are not accompanied by fever, can be long lasting and may come and go seasonally or seemingly at random.

Something in the Air

Most allergies are from airborne allergens, although people can also have allergies to medications, foods, chemicals and other substances that are either touched or ingested. Common symptoms of airborne allergies include:

- Sneezing
- Runny or stuffed-up nose
- Itchy eyes, nose and throat
- Dark circles under the eyes caused by increased blood flow near sinuses
- Watery, red-rimmed or swollen eyes

Normal: In someone who does not have allergies, a particle of dust or pollen enters the nose and is moved by the nasal passages into the throat, where it is swallowed or coughed out.

Allergy: In an allergic person, the particle sparks a chain reaction, releasing histamine and other chemicals into the lining of the nose, causing the nasal passages to swell and release fluid — a stuffy, runny nose.

SAMPLE