

Allergic Rhinitis

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What is it?

Allergic rhinitis is sometimes referred to as "hay fever", although hay fever is not a fever and is not usually caused by hay. For many people the disease actually is more properly termed *allergic rhinoconjunctivitis*, because it affects both the nose and the eyes. Other names include *seasonal nasal allergy*, *seasonal allergic rhinitis* or *perennial allergic rhinitis*.

Who gets it?

Each year more than 50 million Americans are affected with allergic rhinitis. Sensitivity to allergens frequently starts in childhood or young adulthood. Episodes occur seasonally timed with the offending weed, grass or tree and sometimes are year round.

Allergic rhinitis is often hereditary. In fact, if one parent has allergies, chances are 50% that children will be allergic as well. The chances increase even more if both parents are allergic.

What causes it?

You have an allergy when your body overreacts to substances (*allergens*) that don't cause problems for most people. An immune response occurs when the body's immune system defends itself from allergens by forming *antibodies*. Antibodies are "scouts" that identify and attack foreign invaders. Antibodies attach to the allergen and trigger the release of *histamine*. Histamine brings on the familiar symptoms of allergic rhinitis.

The most common allergens in the air are pollen, mold, dust and animal dander. Allergies that occur in the spring (late February through April) are usually due to tree pollen. Allergies in the summer (May to August) are often due to grass pollen. Fall allergies (July to the first frost) are due to weed pollen. Pollen from the ragweed plant is the most common cause of allergic rhinitis in the United States.

Mold is common where water tends to collect, such as shower curtains, window moldings and damp basements. It can also be found in rotting logs, hay, mulches, compost piles and leaf litter. This allergy is usually worse during humid and rainy weather.

Dust contains many allergens, including *dust mites*. Dust mites are tiny creatures found in bedding, mattresses, carpeting and upholstered furniture. They like places where it's warm and humid. They live off dead skin cells and other things found in house dust.

Pet dander is made up of bits of skin and hair from animals. Both are allergens. You can be exposed to dander when handling an animal, or from house dust that contains dander.

What are the symptoms?

Anyone who suffers from allergic rhinitis knows all too well how uncomfortable the symptoms can be. The chart below lists some of the common symptoms.

Symptoms of Allergic Rhinitis

- Sneezing
- Itchy eyes, nose or roof of the mouth
- Watery eyes and runny nose
- Sinus congestion and pressure
- Postnasal drip, sore throat or cough
- Decreased sense of smell or taste
- Fatigue, malaise and irritability

How do you prevent it?

The best way to control allergic rhinitis is to control your environment. Avoidance of allergens is the key.

Pollens can be removed by showering or bathing before bedtime to wash off the allergens that may have collected in your hair and on your skin. Avoid going outside for prolonged periods on dry, windy days. Keeping the windows and doors shut can be useful, as can using an air conditioner, both in the home and car.

Molds can be reduced by removing houseplants and by frequently cleaning shower curtains, bathroom windows, damp walls, and trash cans. Use a mix of water and chlorine bleach to kill mold. Don't carpet bathrooms or other damp rooms and use mold proof paint instead of wallpaper. Throw away old books, shoes and bedding. Increase ventilation, especially in the basement and bathrooms.

Dust mites can be reduced by removing the places in which they like to live and breed, such as carpets, drapes and feather pillows and by making your home less inviting by lowering the humidity (<50%) and frequently dusting with a damp cloth. Pay special attention to your bedroom and remove stuffed animals.

Tips on reducing dust mites

- Replace carpets with linoleum or wood.
- Mop floors and dust frequently.
- Vacuum regularly (2x/week) with a high efficiency particulate air (HEPA) filter. Vacuum soft furniture and curtains, as well as floors.
- Install an air cleaner with a high efficiency particulate (HEPA) or electrostatic filter.
- Wash bedding in hot water (130F) weekly.
- Don't use mattress pads.
- Cover mattress and pillows with plastic.

Pet dander can be reduced by keeping pets outside since they bring pollen and animal dander in with them. Cat or dog dander is often in house dust and takes four weeks or more to settle down, so a short term trial of removing your pet may not help you find out if this is the problem. Bathing the pet weekly may help.

There are also a few environmental conditions which may not directly trigger allergies, but which can certainly make allergies worse. These include: aerosol sprays, air pollution, cold temperatures, humidity, tobacco smoke, and wind.

Can it be treated?

Commonly used medications for treating allergic rhinitis include antihistamines, decongestants and anti-inflammatory medicines. Allergy shots can also help some people with severe symptoms. There is no cure.

- **Antihistamines** help reduce the sneezing, runny nose and itchiness of allergies by preventing histamine release from causing an irritation in the nose and eye tissue. They're more useful if you use them before you're exposed to allergens.

You can buy some oral antihistamines without a prescription. Ingredients in the older antihistamines include brompheniramine, chlorpheniramine, clemastine or diphenhydramine. These work to relieve symptoms just as well as the newer medicines, but they tend to cause more sedation and performance impairment. The newer antihistamines, including loratadine, cetirizine, and fexofenadine are less likely to cause drowsiness or dry mouth, and are frequently taken only once or twice daily, but they are much more expensive. Loratadine is also available over-the-counter without a prescription. A nasal spray antihistamine is available with rapid onset of action but needs to be used twice daily.

- **Decongestants** help relieve the stuffy nose and sinus congestion of allergies. They come as pills, nose sprays or drops, and eye drops. It's best not to use the nose sprays or drops for more than three days, because you can become dependent on them very easily.

You can buy decongestants without a prescription. Decongestants can cause high blood pressure, irritability and insomnia.

- **Cromolyn** (Nasal crom) is a nasal spray available over the counter that helps reduce runny nose, sneezing, and itching. It may not be fully effective for 2-4 weeks after you begin using it. Cromolyn is often used for children because it is extremely safe, but possible side effects include nasal irritation and stinging.

- **Ipratropium** (Atrovent) can quickly reduce runny nose and congestion anytime after symptoms develop. Possible side effects include nasal dryness or bloody nose.

- **Corticosteroids** help reduce the swelling in your nose and sinuses so that you feel less congested. You won't notice their benefits for up to two weeks after starting them. The prescription inhaled steroids include beclomethasone, triamcinolone and flunisolide. Steroids can also be given as pills or by injection. The advantage of inhaled steroids is that they aren't as likely to have side effects as steroid pills or injections.

- **Allergy shots** (Immunotherapy) contain small amounts of allergens. They are given on a regular schedule so that your body gets used to the allergens and no longer overreacts to them. Immunotherapy is both expensive and time consuming. Therefore, it is usually used as a last resort for patients who are severely limited despite full medical therapy.

Are there complications?

You should be able to live an active life if you follow your treatment carefully. Serious complications are rare but the symptoms of allergic rhinitis often interfere with work or recreational activities and the treatments occasionally have side effects.

In summary

- The most common symptoms are runny nose, congestion, sneezing, watery eyes, and itching of the eyes, nose, and roof of the mouth.
- Avoidance of allergens is the key to prevention.
- For more information, contact the Asthma and Allergy Foundation of America at aafa.org or (800) 727-8462.