



Basic Facts About Allergies

This fact sheet can help you find out what causes your allergy symptoms. It also suggests ways to prevent and treat these symptoms.

For years, I often felt tired and congested. I thought I had allergies and that I would just have to put up with them. I tried over-the-counter allergy medicines. But they didn't seem to help and made me even more tired. Finally, I asked my doctor about getting tested for allergies. Now I know what I'm allergic to and have a plan for preventing and treating my allergy symptoms. And I have the energy to keep up with my three young children. –*

Jordan, age 35

What is an allergy?

An allergy occurs when you react to things like pollen and cats that don't affect most people. (Hay fever, also called allergic rhinitis, is an allergy to pollen.) If you come into contact with something you are allergic to (called an allergen), you may have symptoms. This is called an allergic reaction.

What are the symptoms of allergies?

Different allergens cause different symptoms. Some allergy symptoms are watery eyes, stuffy nose; itchy nose, eyes, and roof of the mouth; and hives. Many people get asthma symptoms such as wheezing (a whistling sound when a person breathes) and trouble breathing after having contact with allergens. But not everyone with asthma has allergies.

How serious are allergic responses?

Some people have a severe allergic reaction to an allergen. Most commonly, this is caused by insect stings, certain foods or medicines. This is called anaphylaxis (anna-fih-LACK-sis). This reaction usually occurs within a few minutes after contact with an allergen, and it can be life-threatening.

Some signs of anaphylaxis are swelling of the tongue, throat, or both; hives; trouble with breathing; rapid shallow breathing; and nausea and vomiting. There are ways to avoid anaphylaxis and to treat it if it occurs. Talk with your doctor about steps you can take to avoid severe allergic reactions. If you have a severe allergy, ask for medicine to use in case of an emergency.

Who is likely to develop an allergy?

If your parents have or had allergies, you are more likely to have them. But you may not be allergic or sensitive to the same things. People do not "outgrow" their allergies. Even if you don't have allergy symptoms for a while, they can return later in life.

How are allergies diagnosed?

Your doctor will review your medical history, ask questions about your symptoms and possible allergens. He or she may refer you to an allergy expert (allergist) to do skin testing, and test your blood. With skin testing, a small amount of a possible allergen is pricked or scratched into the skin. If you're sensitive to an allergen, a small red lump appears on the skin.

Who should treat my allergies?

Your doctor can treat allergies. If your symptoms are not under control within 3 to 6 months, if your allergies are severe, or if you've needed emergency treatment, you may need to see an allergy expert. Allergists are experts in treating allergies and asthma.





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Allergy checklist

This checklist shows some common allergens and allergy symptoms. It may not cover all your allergies. But you can at least start to learn what you may be allergic to. Place a check next to the allergies you think you may have. Show this checklist to your doctor.

	Common Allergens	Common Allergy Symptoms
	Pollen from trees, weeds, and grasses	Hay fever (allergic rhinitis) symptoms such as runny nose; sneezing; and itchy nose, eyes, and roof of the mouth.
	Dander (flaked skin) from animals	The same symptoms as those of a pollen allergy. Can also cause wheezing and coughing.
	Dust mites (tiny bugs that live in home) and cockroaches allergy.	The same symptoms as those of a pollen allergy. Can also cause wheezing and coughing.
	Foods, especially cow's milk, soy, eggs, wheat, peanuts, tree nuts, fish, and shellfish	Swelling of the lips or tongue; hives; a tight feeling in the throat; hoarseness; nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, wheezing, itchy eyes, and anaphylaxis.
	Latex, sometimes called natural rubber	Itchy skin, red rash, blisters, or raised patches. Can cause anaphylaxis. Things like poison ivy and poison oak also can cause this response.
	Medicines—prescription (such as penicillin) and over-the counter	Symptoms ranging from rashes and hives to anaphylaxis.
	Stings from bees, wasps, and ants	Pain, itching, and swelling at the sting site or over a larger area. They can also lead to anaphylaxis.





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What can I do to control my allergy symptoms?

Controlling your allergies means preventing symptoms when you can, and treating them when they occur.

Take these steps:

1. Find out what you're allergic to. Ask your doctor for allergy tests.
2. Once you know your allergens, avoid or limit contact with them. For example, if you're allergic to dust mites, reduce the clutter in your house, which collects dust.
3. Take medicine to relieve your symptoms. Your doctor may prescribe medicines such as antihistamines, decongestants, nose (nasal) sprays, or eye drops.
4. Get allergy shots, if the doctor says you should. Some people need them when they can't avoid an allergen. The shots contain a tiny but increasing amount of the allergen you're sensitive to. Over time, your body becomes used to the allergen, and no longer reacts to it.

Will moving to a different area help my allergies?

Probably not. For a list of the 100 most challenging places to live with allergies in the spring and fall seasons, visit www.aafa.org. Also keep in mind that if you move to another region, you may become sensitive to new allergens and need allergy shots again.

Does health insurance cover allergy treatment?

Most health insurance plans cover allergy treatment. Ask your insurance carrier:

- Do I need a referral from my doctor to see an allergy expert?
- Does my insurance cover patient education or special services for my allergies?
- Does my insurance company cover a pre-existing problem? This usually means any health problem that you had before you joined your current health plan.
- What medicines does my plan cover?

For More Information

The Asthma and Allergy Foundation of America offers many fact sheets on asthma and allergies. You can order them by e-mail or toll-free telephone call or print copies from AAFA's website.

Asthma and Allergy Foundation of America
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The Asthma and Allergy Foundation of America (AAFA) provides practical information, community-based services, and support through education, materials, and a national network of chapters and educational support groups. AAFA also supports research to find cures and better treatments for asthma and allergic diseases. Your tax-deductible donation helps support our programs and services.