

Understanding allergies

Do you find yourself sneezing at certain times of the year? Do your eyes start to itch every time you go near your neighbor's dog or cat?

If so, you may be among the estimated 50 million Americans affected by allergies. Identifying the source of your allergic reactions and developing an effective treatment plan can greatly

improve your symptoms.

A study in the January 19, 2000, issue of *JAMA* reports that children and adolescents in Finland who had measles were more likely to develop allergies.

The researchers state that the study does not support the theory that having measles protects against developing allergies. 

WHAT IS AN ALLERGY?

An allergy refers to an abnormal reaction to certain substances called **allergens**. These allergens may be inhaled, swallowed, or come in contact with the skin to trigger a reaction from the body's immune system.

COMMON ALLERGENS:

- **Animal dander** – People are not allergic to the hair of animals, but rather to a protein found in the saliva, **dander** (dead skin flakes), or urine of an animal with fur. Symptoms of animal allergy include sneezing, itchy, runny nose, and itchy, swollen eyes and throat.
- **Dust mites** – The droppings of these microscopic organisms are found throughout the home and are the most common triggers of year-round allergy and asthma symptoms. Mites live in bedding, upholstered furniture, and carpets. They thrive in high humidity. Symptoms of dust mite allergy include a congested or runny nose with sneezing (particularly in the morning), itchy, watery eyes, coughing, and wheezing.
- **Insect stings** – Some people suffer from venom allergy from the bites of certain insects. The allergy can be life-threatening and result in **anaphylaxis** (a severe reaction that can include a sense of warmth, flushing, itching, hives, swelling in the throat, wheezing, lightheadedness, irregular heart rhythm, nausea or vomiting, abdominal cramping, or shock), which is considered a medical emergency. Most sting reactions in the United States are caused by 5 types of insects: yellow jackets, honeybees, paper wasps, hornets, and fire ants.
- **Medications** – A small percentage of people may develop an allergic reaction to some types of medication. The symptoms of an allergic reaction to medication vary but may range from an itchy rash and hives to anaphylaxis.
- **Mold spores** – Indoor molds and mildew thrive in humid areas of the home such as damp basements and bathrooms. These fungi send out small spores that can trigger allergy symptoms. Symptoms are similar to those of pollen allergies.
- **Pollen** – Commonly called "hay fever," pollen allergies are among the most common chronic conditions in the United States. The most common producers of allergenic pollen include weeds (such as ragweed, sagebrush, redroot pigweed, and Russian thistle), grasses, and trees. These dry pollens are disseminated by the wind and trigger allergy symptoms. Common symptoms include sneezing, congestion, a runny nose, and itchiness in the nose, roof of the mouth, throat, eyes, and ears. 

WHAT TO DO:

If you suspect you might have allergies, see your doctor for a professional diagnosis and to devise a treatment plan that works best for you. You may be referred to another doctor who specializes in allergies. To diagnose an allergy, your doctor will conduct a thorough medical history and physical examination. Allergy skin tests or blood tests also may be used to determine the type of allergies you may have. If you have a severe medication allergy, wear a necklace or bracelet that identifies your allergy so that you can be treated appropriately in emergencies. 

PREVENTION:

Once you and your doctor determine the nature of your allergies, the best way to prevent allergic reactions is to avoid the things that trigger your allergy symptoms. If you're allergic to animal dander, don't keep cats or dogs as pets and avoid contact with them as much as possible. If you have an allergic reaction, your doctor can prescribe medication to help prevent or relieve the symptoms. For some people, **immunotherapy** (also known as allergy shots, where your doctor administers gradually increasing doses of an allergen over a period of months to years) may work to reduce the immune system's reactions to allergens.

FOR MORE INFORMATION:

- American Academy of Allergy, Asthma, and Immunology
800/822-2762 or www.aaaai.org
- National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases
Building 31, Room 7A50
31 Center Drive, MSC 2520
Bethesda, MD 20892-2520
or www.niaid.nih.gov 

INFORM YOURSELF:

To find this and previous *JAMA* Patient Pages, check out the AMA's Web site at www.ama-assn.org/consumer.htm. 

Additional Sources: American Academy of Allergy, Asthma, and Immunology, National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases

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