



nothing to sneeze at

for 50 million Americans, allergies plague the eyes, the nose and sometimes the stomach, too. here's what you need to know

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We all know that a good immune system is important in warding off disease, but nearly one in four of us, or up to 50 million Americans, have an overactive immune system that can cause us to suffer minor discomfort to life-threatening attacks. Sound scary? We're talking about allergies.

An allergic reaction occurs when a substance (pollen or a food, for instance) enters or touches the body, activating antibodies called immunoglobulin E, or IgE. To attack the allergen, which it perceives as harmful, IgE causes the release of chemicals that lead to symptoms as mild as sneezing or as severe as shock.

Major kinds of allergies include indoor/outdoor (allergic rhinitis); skin; food; latex; insect; and medicine. Reactions include sneezing, runny nose, watery eyes, itching, swelling and hives. With food allergies, rash, swelling and intestinal symptoms are most common, according to the American College of Allergy, Asthma & Immunology.

Occasionally, the immune system reaction is so severe that blood pressure drops, and the person suffers shock or loss of consciousness. This is anaphylaxis, which can be life-threatening. Unfortunately, there is no way to cure allergies, which are often inherited. But with treatment, the condition can be controlled and improved.

A breakdown of what you need to know about specific allergies: **INDOOR/OUTDOOR ALLERGIES (ALLERGIC RHINITIS).** These allergies, known as hay fever (though no hay or fever is involved), are by

far the most common. Triggers include pollen (especially ragweed), mold, dust mites and pet dander. Itchy nose, persistent sneezing, and watery or itchy eyes are typical. Sometimes, an allergy is mistaken for a cold. With an allergy, you won't have a fever, and your symptoms will occur intermittently over weeks rather than days.

EYE ALLERGIES. This condition, allergic conjunctivitis, spells red, itchy, swollen, watery eyes, and can occur alone or accompany nasal allergy symptoms. They share many of the same triggers, such as pollens, pet dander, mold and dust mites.

FOOD ALLERGIES. According to the nonprofit Food Allergy & Anaphylaxis Network (FAAN), eight foods cause 90 percent of food allergies. They are milk, eggs, peanuts, tree nuts (walnuts, cashews), fish, shellfish, soy and wheat. The National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases says food allergy is on the rise and occurs in up to 8 percent of all children under 4. The most common adult-onset food allergen is shrimp, according to Anne Muñoz-Furlong, chief executive officer of FAAN.



free e-mail alerts

The Food Allergy & Anaphylaxis Network offers free e-mail alerts about food allergies, including food recalls. To sign up, go to **foodallergy.org** and follow the "Special Allergy Alerts" links.

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SKIN ALLERGIES. Touching plants (especially poison ivy), detergents, nickel, nail polish remover—and many other substances—can trigger skin inflammation called allergic contact dermatitis. Separately, atopic dermatitis (eczema) is marked by very itchy rash and runs in families with a history of allergies. More children, especially younger than 5, than adults have atopic dermatitis, but it can flare throughout life. An array of irritants, from airborne allergens to food, stress and climate, can trigger it.

INSECT ALLERGIES. Wasps, yellow jackets, hornets and bees are the most common sources of stings. A typical nonallergic reaction is swelling and redness at the sting site. Allergic reactions are marked by difficulty breathing, hives away from the sting site, dizziness, hoarseness and facial swelling.

LATEX ALLERGIES. Though not common in the general population, this allergy occurs at a considerably higher rate (up to 17 percent) among healthcare workers who come into

contact with latex through products including gloves and blood-pressure cuffs, the American Latex Allergy Association says. Reactions can include watery eyes, sneezing, itchy skin, hives and shock.

MEDICINE ALLERGIES. Reactions may occur immediately after taking a drug or several days later. The following kinds of drugs most commonly cause symptoms, according to the Asthma and Allergy Foundation of America: antibiotics (penicillins, cephalosporines, sulfa); anticonvulsants; and insulin from pork and beef sources.

treatment and diagnosis

Although many people rely on over-the-counter medications or try to control their environment by staying inside when pollen counts are high and cleaning for dust mites, pet dander and mold, you may want to go to an allergist if your symptoms persist or interfere with your daily life.

Allergies are diagnosed through a skin test or a blood test called RAST (radioallergosorbent). Treatments include antihistamines, decongestants, nasal steroids, creams and ointments, eyedrops, and a series of shots known as immunotherapy. Food allergies are best treated by avoiding the trigger foods. **v&v**

the concern about kids

Of all allergy categories, none concerns researchers more than food allergies in children. Food allergy occurs in up to 8 percent of kids under 4, and the numbers are increasing, according to the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (NIAID).

Fortunately, most kids will outgrow allergies to eggs, milk and wheat. But peanuts and tree nuts are lifelong allergens, says Anne Muñoz-Furlong, head of the Food Allergy & Anaphylaxis Network. "These are the foods that provoke the most serious reactions," she says, including anaphylactic shock and death.

The only way to ward off a possibly deadly reaction is to avoid eating the allergen. Parents of teenagers need to be especially watchful.

"Teenagers are at the stage when they go out to eat with their friends, and they don't want to say they can't go to a particular restaurant," Muñoz-Furlong explains. "They may not even tell their friends they have food allergies."

The remedy: Help your child plan ahead. Make a list of safe restaurants, and encourage your teen to tell friends about the condition. "Most teens will want to help," Muñoz-Furlong says.

