

Allergies, Antibiotics and Colds

It sometimes can be difficult to distinguish between symptoms of a cold and symptoms of nasal allergies (“allergic rhinitis”). Here are a few tips:

1. Fever is not a symptom of allergic rhinitis.
 2. Itching of the nose (and frequently of the eyes as well) is usually not present with a cold.
 3. If a close family member has been ill with a cold, and you or your child develops nasal symptoms within a few days, the symptoms are probably due to a cold.
 4. Symptoms of a cold usually worsen for about 3 to 5 days after their onset, and then gradually improve over the next 5 to 7 days.
- It is noteworthy that people who have frequent colds or chronic cold-like symptoms actually may have allergic rhinitis; in other words, the cold-like symptoms that seem to occur so very often actually may be symptoms of nasal allergies.
 - Medications that are used for treating nasal allergies often help symptoms of a cold, and vice versa.
 - The seasons during which the nasal symptoms occur can provide a clue to the cause of the symptoms. For example, upper respiratory symptoms that occur for a few weeks in the summer are most likely symptoms of allergic rhinitis, whereas nasal symptoms that occur 3 to 5 times per winter, with each episode lasting for approximately 10 days, are probably due to colds.

Colds and Antibiotics

- On a somewhat different note, if you or your child has a cold, antibiotics will not be helpful and should not be prescribed or taken, since a cold is caused by a viral infection of the nasal membranes. Further, antibiotics will not prevent a cold from occurring.
- Antibiotics are not without risk, although their risk is relatively small. Allergic reactions may occur, and may be severe. Gastrointestinal symptoms are not uncommon, including diarrhea and a very severe gastrointestinal infection known as pseudomembranous enterocolitis. Frequent use of antibiotics can lead to the development of resistant bacteria. The widespread overuse of antibiotics throughout the world has been associated with this ever increasing problem.
- In patients who are prone to bacterial sinus infections, a clue that a cold has turned into a sinus infection is that the upper respiratory symptoms have not resolved in 10 to 14 days; also, a sinus infection may have developed if the person with a cold starts to feel worse 7 to 10 days after the cold starts instead of better. Sinus pressure and discolored (e.g. yellow or green) nasal mucus often occur with a cold, so these symptoms are not necessarily indicative of a bacterial sinus infection.