



## Frequently Asked Questions – Allergies

### **What is an allergy?**

A person's immune system is able to defend itself against viruses or bacteria. But sometimes, the defenses are too aggressive and certain substances are mistakenly identified by the body as harmful. This overzealous response can cause unpleasant and, in extreme cases, life-threatening symptoms.

### **What causes allergic reactions?**

Many ordinary substances can trigger an allergic reaction. Among the most common triggers are plant pollens, molds, household dust, dust mites, animal dander, chemicals, foods, medications, feathers and insect stings. These triggers are called "allergens". It is the body's response to these allergens that causes the symptoms of allergy.

### **What are the different types of allergic reactions and symptoms?**

- Allergic Rhinitis (Hay Fever) – Allergic rhinitis describes reactions that take place when an allergen is inhaled through the nose or mouth. Symptoms may include sneezing, congestion, runny nose, excess mucus, itchy eyes, scratchy or burning throat and skin itching. These symptoms may be caused by pollen and only occurs during the warm seasons. Sometimes the symptoms are year-round, in which the culprit may be dust, dander from indoor pets or animals, or, less frequently, a food allergy.
- Contact Dermatitis (Skin Allergy) – Contact dermatitis, eczema and hives are skin conditions that can be caused by allergens or other irritants. When skin comes in direct contact with these items, symptoms may occur. There are many triggers in addition to the ones listed above.
- Asthma – Asthma is caused when bronchial muscle spasms constrict the flow of air to the lungs. The linings of airways become inflamed and swollen, and excess mucus may clog the airways. An asthma attack is characterized by labored or restricted breathing, a tight feeling in the chest, coughing and wheezing. The symptoms may develop quickly and may vary in severity from mild discomfort to life-threatening events.
- Anaphylaxis – Anaphylaxis is a rare, potentially fatal allergic reaction that affects many parts of the body at once. The trigger may be an insect sting, a food or medication. Symptoms may include a drop in blood pressure, flushing, difficulty breathing, swelling of the throat and loss of consciousness. The symptoms may be immediate and progress rapidly. Emergency medical attention should be sought at the first sign of an anaphylactic reaction.

### **How can an allergist help?**

An allergist has specialized training and expertise in managing patients with these conditions. They can help you identify causes, triggers and develop a treatment plan for your individual needs. The goal is for you to lead a life that is normal and as symptom-free as possible.

### **What can I expect during an allergy evaluation?**

An allergy evaluation has many components. It will include a thorough history of your symptoms, triggers and environment. A physical exam is performed to aid in making a diagnosis. Many types of diagnostic testing are available as well. This may include allergy skin testing, pulmonary functions and specialized tests that can be ordered for specific medication, food or exercise conditions. A treatment plan is designed to address the specific concerns of each patient, with the goal to have each patient understand their disease, as well as its treatment and prevention options.

### **What types of treatment are available?**

- Prevention – The most effective approach to treating asthma or allergies is to avoid the factors that trigger the condition in the first place. Even when it is not possible to completely avoid allergens, an allergist can design strategies for reducing exposure and preventing symptoms.
- Medications – A number of new and effective medications are available. The goal is to outline what is available and to balance safety and effective plans with what each patient's needs.
- Immunotherapy (Allergy Injections) – There are two types of treatments that are offered for our patients:
  - Allergy Injections – In this treatment, the patient is injected over the course of time with gradually increasing doses of the substances to which they are allergic. In many cases, the body's reaction to the substance becomes less pronounced over time.
  - Allergy Drops – This is called sublingual (under the tongue) and are allergens in solution that are placed under the tongue. These drops can be safely administered at home on a daily basis. This therapy is particularly helpful in young children in hope of preventing the continued worsening of childhood allergies and asthma.

### **What is a food allergy?**

A true food allergy involves the abnormal response of the body's immune mechanisms to specific foods or food ingredients. A wide variety of symptoms can occur with a food allergy and usually fall into these categories:

- Gastrointestinal: abdominal pain, nausea, vomiting, diarrhea
- Skin : itching, hives, swelling, rash
- Upper and lower respiratory: asthma, cough, nasal symptoms, watery/itchy eyes, throat swelling, hoarseness, trouble swallowing.

### **What foods cause allergic reactions?**

Foods that commonly cause allergy in infants and children are egg, fish, milk, peanuts, soy, and wheat. Foods that commonly cause allergy in adults are soy, fish, shellfish, peanuts and nuts. However, food allergy may develop to any food that is included in the diet, and may develop at any time in life.

### **How are food allergies treated?**

Once a food allergy is diagnosed, avoidance is critical. Food selection and preparation techniques must be carefully reviewed. There are many educational resources available when seeking help for the food allergic individual.