

First, what is an allergy?

Allergies are among the most common long-lasting (chronic) conditions around the world. According to leading experts in allergy, an allergic reaction begins in your immune system. The immune system protects us from invading organisms that can cause illness. If you have an allergy, your immune system mistakenly sees a substance that is usually harmless as an invader. These substances are called allergens.



Did You Know?

Allergy experts don't fully understand why some people have allergies and some don't. **A family history of allergies is the most important factor that may cause you to develop an allergy.**

How does an allergic reaction happen?

When it notices an allergen, your immune system overreacts by producing special proteins called antibodies. These antibodies (called immunoglobulin, or IgE) travel to cells that release histamine and other chemicals. That's how you get an allergic reaction. The reaction triggers symptoms in various parts of the body. These can occur in the

- nose
- sinuses
- lining of the stomach
- lungs
- ears
- skin
- throat



For some people, allergies can also trigger symptoms of asthma.

What types of allergens are most common?



Pollen



Dust



Foods



Medications/Drugs



Insect Stings



Animal Dander



Mold



Latex

The most common allergic reactions produce symptoms such as

- itching in the nose, roof of the mouth, throat, eyes
- sneezing
- stuffy nose (congestion)
- watery eyes
- dark circles under the eyes

Food or medication allergens may produce a different set of symptoms. These often occur right after you eat the food or take the medication you're allergic to. They include

- vomiting
- diarrhea
- difficulty breathing
- anaphylaxis
- skin rash or hives

Can allergic reactions be dangerous?

Allergic reactions may make you feel uncomfortable, or even sick. A less common reaction, called anaphylaxis, is a serious allergic reaction. **Anaphylaxis is potentially life-threatening.** Foods, insect bites, medications, and latex are the most common allergens that can cause anaphylaxis.

In severe cases, someone in anaphylaxis may have a drop in blood pressure that causes them to lose consciousness and go into shock. This requires immediate medical attention.



When to Get Help

Anaphylaxis typically affects more than one part of the body at the same time. **If you experience several of these symptoms together, go directly to the nearest emergency room or call 911.**

- feeling warm or flushing
- red, itchy rash
- feeling lightheaded (feeling faint)
- shortness of breath
- throat tightness
- anxiety
- pain, cramps, and/or vomiting and diarrhea



The most common kinds of allergies

There are several common types of allergies. If think you have one of these allergies, talk to your provider about the treatment that is right for you.



Nasal allergy (allergic rhinitis)

Allergic rhinitis causes symptoms in your nose. It can occur seasonally or year-round. Seasonal allergies are often called 'hay fever.' People who have hay fever suffer most in the spring, summer or fall. The symptoms include sneezing, stuffy or runny nose, and itching in the nose, eyes, or the roof of your mouth. When the symptoms are year-round, they may be caused by indoor allergens such as dust mites, indoor molds, or pets.



Hives (urticaria)

Hives are itchy, red bumps on the skin that can occur in clumps. They can either be large or small. Certain foods or medications can trigger the body to produce hives.



Eye allergy (allergic conjunctivitis)

Allergic conjunctivitis occurs when the eyes react to allergens. These symptoms include redness, itching, and swelling.



Skin allergy (atopic dermatitis or eczema)

Your skin is another place allergic reactions can occur. This is called atopic dermatitis, or eczema. Skin allergy occurs from direct contact with an allergen. Symptoms include itching, redness, flaking, or skin peeling. For 80% of people with atopic dermatitis the symptoms begin in childhood. More than half of those with this type of allergy also develop asthma.



Are allergies and asthma related?

Asthma is a chronic lung disease in which the airways become inflamed. This makes it more difficult to breathe. People with asthma may experience tightness in the chest, coughing, shortness of breath and wheezing.



As many as 78% of people with asthma also have nasal allergies (allergic rhinitis). For people with asthma, breathing in allergens can increase the swelling in the airways. This causes them to narrow and can worsen breathing problems.



Learn more about allergies from these trusted sources

Your Ochsner allergy team recommends the following websites to learn more about allergies. Scan these codes with your phone's camera or visit the American Academy of Allergy, Asthma & Immunology at aaaai.org/tools-for-the-public or the American College of Asthma Allergy and Immunology at acaai.org.

- Check pollen counts
- Glossary and drug guide
- Interactive tools
- Online symptom test
- Videos
- Support and resources
- Tips for managing allergies
- Vaccine information
- Latest research and articles



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