

ALLERGY AND HAYFEVER

Allergy symptoms appear when the body's immune system begins to respond to a substance as though it were a dangerous invader (called an antigen or allergen). It does this by sending specific defenders called antibodies to the entry site. The battle between allergen and antibody results in a release of chemical mediators, such as histamine, into the bloodstream. Those chemical mediators cause changes in the body, which produce the symptoms that we feel.

Ear, nose and throat symptoms that may be caused by allergy are itching eyes, sneezing, nasal stuffiness, nasal congestion and drainage, and sometimes headache. Some people experience hearing changes, scratchy sore throats, hoarseness, and cough. Other less common symptoms include balance disturbances, swelling in face or throat tissues, skin irritations, and even respiratory problems and asthma.

Some allergy sufferers experience symptoms all year. Others find certain seasons bring on attacks. Allergy symptom control is most successful when multiple management approaches are used simultaneously. Minimizing exposure to allergens, managing symptoms with medications, and desensitization with allergy shots are all methods that can be useful in controlling allergic symptoms.

Hay fever is caused by pollens. The most significant cause of hay fever in Australia are grass, flowering plants such as wattle and house dust mite.



Certain allergens are always present. These include house dust, household pet danders, foods, wool, various chemicals used around the house, and more.

Symptoms from these are frequently worse in the winter when the house is closed up. Mold spores cause at least as many allergy problems as pollens.

Colourful or fragrant flowering plants rarely cause allergy because their pollens are too heavy to be airborne.

Treatment And Prevention

A number of medications are useful in the treatment of allergy including antihistamines, steroid sprays (eg. Nasonex, Rhinocort, Avamys) and saline sprays (eg. FLO, FESS, Sinus rinse). The medical management of allergy also includes counselling in proper environmental control. Based on a detailed history and thorough examination, your doctor may advise testing to determine the specific substances to which you are allergic.

The treatments employed by your ENT doctor will depend on the materials to which you are allergic and the degree of your sensitivity to them. The only "cure" available for inhalant allergy is the administration of injections (allergy shots or drops) that build up protective antibodies to specific allergens (pollens, moulds, animal danders, dust, etc.).

Surgery in Nasal Allergy

Turbinate hypertrophy causing continuous nasal obstruction, nasal polyps and allergically triggered sinusitis may require surgical correction. If surgery is a consideration in your treatment, your general practitioner and ENT Surgeon will discuss the risks, benefits and expected outcomes with you.

Tips for Controlling Your Environment:

- Wear a pollen mask when mowing grass or house cleaning (most drugstores sell them).
- Change the air filters monthly in heating and air conditioning systems, and/or install an air purifier.
- Keep windows and doors closed during heavy pollen seasons.
- Rid your home of indoor plants and other sources of mildew.
- Don't allow dander-producing animals (i.e., cats, dogs, etc.) in your home.

- Change feather pillows, woolen blankets, and woolen clothing to cotton or synthetic materials.
- Use dust mite protection covers for your mattress and pillow (available from Kmart, Target or www.allergend.com.au)
- Wash sheets, pillows and protection covers once a week in hot water (over 60 degrees celsius to kill the dust mite) and dry them in the sun.
- Use antihistamine and decongestants as necessary and as tolerated.
- Sleep with a brick or two placed under bedposts at the head of the bed to help relieve nasal congestion.
- Observe general good health practices; exercise daily, stop smoking, avoid air pollutants, eat a balanced diet.
- Consider a humidifier in the winter. Dry, indoor heat aggravates many allergic people. Be sure to clean the humidifier regularly.

Your otolaryngologist is the specialist best trained to help you with sinus problems or other complications from nasal allergy. The Hills ENT Group offers allergy testing, and surgical management of nasal and sinus allergy problems.

(Adapted with permission from the Patient Discussion Booklet American Academy of Otolaryngology Head & Neck Surgery)