

ALLERGIC RHINITIS

Allergic rhinitis (allergies, hay fever) is the most common chronic disease of the respiratory tract. Nearly 30% of Americans have some form of nasal/sinus/eye allergies (sometimes it seems like they all live in Georgia!). For most allergy sufferers the symptoms are mild and short-lived or seasonal. However, some patients can have severe allergy symptoms, often year-round, and these symptoms can make it difficult or impossible for the patient to complete even the simplest daily activities.

A wide variety of substances can trigger allergy symptoms and for each patient the list is different. Although allergies run in families, not everyone in the same family will be allergic to the same substances. Classic "hay fever" (seasonal allergies) is caused by pollens and grasses, and tends to occur in the spring and/or fall. However, in Georgia, where many plants bloom year-round, pollen allergies can occur in the winter and summer. Perennial allergies are also commonly due to dusts, molds and animal hair/dander.



Allergic symptoms include: nasal stuffiness; clear, watery nasal discharge; itchy, watery eyes; post-nasal drip, often with morning sore throats; hoarse voice; sinus headaches; cough; fatigue; and wheezing. Allergy patients may have any or all of these symptoms.

Not all patients with allergy-like symptoms have true allergic rhinitis. Symptoms may be due to sensitivities (pollutants, chemicals, cold), infection, medications/drugs, or obstruction (polyps, deviated nasal septum). If a patient has persistent nasal, sinus or eye symptoms, an exam by a medical provider is always in order. Sometimes, lab tests and allergy skin testing are needed to make the proper diagnosis.

Treatment of allergic rhinitis can take many forms, including:

Avoidance/Environmental Adjustments: If you are lucky enough to know what you are allergic to and it can be avoided, do it! Measures such as removal of offending pets, changing air conditioning and heating filters, keeping your home clean and free of dust, eliminating carpets and rugs, and plastic covers for mattresses and pillows can help. Air cleaning devices with HEPA filters also help many patients.

Anti-histamines: Many (but not all) allergic symptoms are due to the body's release of histamine in response to the allergen. Anti-histamines can block the

action of histamine in the airway and eyes, and are available both over-the-counter and by prescription. The most common side effect is drowsiness, although several of the newer, much more expensive prescription and over-the-counter antihistamines (Claritin, Allegra, Zyrtec and others) cause little or no sedation.

Nasal cortisone sprays: Cortisones block the allergic response before the cells release their histamines and other allergy mediators. The nasal cortisone sprays can be quite beneficial with minimal side effects, but usually take some time (about 1-2 weeks commonly) to reach full effectiveness.

Montelukast (Singulair): Singulair is a once daily (at bedtime) pill that blocks the inflammatory response associated with allergies. It is also quite beneficial in asthma.

Immunotherapy (allergy shots): Some, but not all, severe allergy patients benefit from desensitization shots. However, shots are expensive, and often require 1-2 injections per week for years.

Michael J. Huey, MD, 1992, updated 2004

Helpful Links:

American Academy of Family Physicians patient information web site (familydoctor.org), at: <http://familydoctor.org/083.xml>.

The Emory Healthcare Patient Information web site at: <http://healthinfo.healthgate.com/GetContent.aspx?token=8482e079-8512-47c2-960c-a403c77a5e4c&chunkiid=12067>.

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