

Allergic Reaction (Allergies)

Overview

An allergy is the immune system's overreaction to foreign substances that are usually harmless to most people, such as pollen, pet dander, or certain foods. When you come into contact with an allergen, your immune system produces antibodies that identify that specific allergen as harmful, even though it isn't. This triggers the release of chemicals like histamine, which cause inflammation in the skin, sinuses, airways, or digestive system. Allergic reactions can range from minor irritation to a life-threatening emergency known as anaphylaxis.

Symptoms

The symptoms of an allergic reaction depend on how you were exposed whether you touched, inhaled, or ingested the allergen:

- Respiratory (Inhaled): Sneezing; itching of the nose, eyes, or roof of the mouth; runny or stuffy nose; and watery, red, or swollen eyes (allergic conjunctivitis).
- Skin (Contact): Itchy skin, redness, or a raised, bumpy rash called hives (urticaria). Contact dermatitis can cause flaky or blistered skin.
- Food Allergy (Ingested): Tingling or itching in the mouth; swelling of the lips, tongue, face, or throat; and gastrointestinal distress such as stomach cramps, nausea, vomiting, or diarrhea.
- Insect Sting: Large area of swelling at the sting site; itching or hives all over the body; cough, chest tightness, or wheezing.
- Anaphylaxis (Severe): This is a medical emergency. Symptoms include a rapid drop in blood pressure, severe shortness of breath, a rapid but weak pulse, dizziness, and loss of consciousness.

Causes

Common triggers for allergic reactions include:

- Airborne allergens: Pollen from trees/grass, dust mites, mold spores, and animal dander.
- Certain foods: Most commonly peanuts, tree nuts, wheat, soy, fish, shellfish, eggs, and milk.
- Insect stings: Such as those from bees, wasps, or fire ants.
- Medications: Penicillin or penicillin-based antibiotics are common triggers.
- Latex: Or other substances you touch, which can cause skin reactions.

When to See a Doctor

You should consult a doctor if you have symptoms you think are caused by an allergy and over-the-counter medications aren't providing enough relief. Seek emergency medical help immediately if you experience:

- Swelling of the throat or tongue that makes it difficult to breathe or swallow.
- A sudden drop in blood pressure or feeling like you are going to pass out.
- A rapid, weak pulse or blue-tinted skin/lips.
- Nausea and vomiting following an insect sting or new medication.

Home Remedies / Prevention Care

- Identify and Avoid Triggers: This is the most critical step. Keep a diary of what you eat and do to find patterns.
- Saline Nasal Rinse: Use a Neti pot or saline spray to flush allergens from your nasal passages.
- Air Filtration: Use HEPA filters in your vacuum and air purifiers to reduce dust and pollen indoors.
- Wear a Medical Alert Bracelet: If you have a severe allergy, this ensures others know how to help if you cannot speak.
- Emergency Epinephrine: If prescribed, always carry an epinephrine auto-injector (like an EpiPen) and know how to use it.