

Allergy & Asthma Answer Guide

Tips for Breathing Easy

**FOR MORE INFORMATION ABOUT
ALLERGY & ASTHMA, CONTACT
THESE ORGANIZATIONS:**

**AMERICAN ACADEMY OF ASTHMA,
ALLERGY, AND IMMUNOLOGY**
www.aaaai.org or (414) 272-6071

**NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF ALLERGY
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www.niaid.nih.gov or (866) 284-4107

AMERICAN LUNG ASSOCIATION
www.lung.org or (800) 548-8252

**CENTERS FOR DISEASE
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A young woman with long, straight blonde hair is lying on her stomach in a lush green field. She is propped up on her elbows, looking down at a smartphone in her hands with a bright, joyful smile. The background is a soft-focus view of a grassy area with some small white flowers, suggesting a park or a meadow. The lighting is bright and natural, indicating it's daytime.

WHAT ARE ALLERGIES?



Allergies are caused by an unnecessary reaction from your immune system.

Your immune system's job is to keep you healthy by fighting organisms that can make you sick. It guards you by setting off an immune reaction that can protect you from invading organisms. When the "invader" is a harmful bacteria or virus, the system is working as it should. But in some people, the immune system reacts to harmless substances as if they were illness-causing enemies.

For example, in someone with respiratory allergies, the immune system may overreact to pollen, a dusty powder produced by plants, grasses, and trees. In people with food allergies, reactions occur when they come in contact with certain foods.

Substances that cause an allergic reaction are called allergens. When people with allergies are exposed to allergens, their bodies produce antibodies that trigger the release of chemicals into their blood. These chemicals, including one known as histamine, cause allergic symptoms to occur in various parts of the body, including the nose, lungs, throat, sinuses, ears, skin, and stomach.

The most common kind of allergy is known as allergic rhinitis, which is an allergy that primarily affects the nose. This includes pollen allergies as well as allergies to animals or dust. Allergic rhinitis affects as many as one-third of all people.

WHAT ARE THE MOST TYPICAL ALLERGY SYMPTOMS?



Frequent Allergy Triggers

- Animal dander
- Dust
- Food
- Insect stings
- Latex
- Medications
- Mold
- Pollen from grass, trees, and other plants

Allergy symptoms range from minor to life-threatening. When you have an allergic reaction, you may sneeze, cough, or get a runny nose, headache, stuffiness in the sinuses, clogged ears, hives, and rashes.

Sometimes, a more severe reaction can occur. When this happens, symptoms can include abdominal pain, abnormal breathing, chest tightness, difficulty swallowing, dizziness, nausea, vomiting, heart palpitations, and swelling of the face, tongue, or eyes. A serious allergic reaction, which is known as anaphylaxis, can be life-threatening and requires immediate emergency care.



WHAT ARE POLLEN ALLERGIES



Pollen causes more allergic reactions than anything else. Most people with pollen allergies (also known as hay fever, seasonal allergies, or seasonal allergic rhinitis) experience a runny nose, watery eyes, nasal congestion, and sneezing when exposed to pollen. Less often, pollen can cause more serious allergic reactions.

Pollen is produced by plants as part of the fertilization process. Although you may notice clumps of powdery pollen on bright-colored flowers in your garden, most of the pollen that bothers people with allergies actually comes from trees, grasses, and weeds. These plants produce tremendous amounts of very fine, dry pollen that is released into the atmosphere and carried by air currents.

In the United States, ragweed is a major source of allergenic pollen. Other highly allergenic pollen producers include plants (sagebrush, redroot pigweed, lamb's quarters, and Russian thistle), grasses (Timothy, Kentucky bluegrass, Johnson, and Bermuda grasses), and trees (oak, ash, elm, and mountain cedar). Wind carries pollen great distances, so even if you don't have allergenic plants in your yard or neighborhood, you may still be exposed to their pollen.

WHAT ARE FOOD ALLERGIES



Food allergies occur when your immune system reacts to a food you eat. Sometimes, just touching an allergenic food can set off a reaction. Approximately 9 percent of Americans have food allergies.

Allergic reactions to food can range from minor (a runny nose or itchy eyes) to severe (swelling of the throat, difficulty breathing, and even a life-threatening condition known as anaphylactic shock).

Top Allergy-Causing Foods

- Peanuts
- Tree nuts
- Milk
- Wheat
- Eggs
- Soy
- Fish
- Shellfish

HOW ARE ALLERGIES DIAGNOSED



Healthcare providers diagnose allergies in several ways. They start by asking you about your symptoms—when they occur, how often they happen, and so on. You can use the handy Symptom Diary in this brochure to track your symptoms and share the information you gather with your provider.

After learning about your symptoms, your provider may decide to use an allergy skin test that checks for antibodies to specific allergens. During a skin test, your provider exposes you to a very small amount of one or more allergens. The allergens are placed on the surface of the skin or just under the surface, which requires a small needle prick. Swelling, redness, runny nose, and other symptoms tell your provider which allergens provoke an allergic response.

HOW ARE ALLERGIES TREATED ?



Whenever possible, the best approach is to avoid your triggers. But that doesn't always work—if you're allergic to pollen, there's no way to protect yourself from it completely. You can minimize your exposure by staying inside on high-pollen days or filtering your air with an air conditioner. Talk with your provider about what avoidance strategies are best for your kind of allergies.

As for medication, there are several options. Some are available over the counter; others require a prescription. Although over the counter drugs can be effective, make sure to tell your provider that you're using them.

Antihistamines

Can help reduce symptoms such as sneezing, itchiness, and swelling when allergies flare up. Antihistamines are available over the counter or by prescription.

Decongestants

Help relieve stuffiness in the nasal passages. Available as pills, sprays, and drops, decongestants should be used with care because using them for more than a couple of days can actually increase rather than decrease congestion.

Topical nasal steroids

Are anti-inflammatory drugs that are inhaled. They are often paired with antihistamines.

Nasal sprays

Can help stop the release of chemicals that trigger allergy symptoms in the nasal passages.

Allergy shots

Given for several years, they can reduce some kinds of allergies. Ask your provider if they make sense for you.

WHAT IS ASTHMA ?



Asthma is a chronic disease that interferes with your ability to breathe. When you take a breath, the air you pull into your nose or mouth travels into your lungs through a series of tubes and airways. As you inhale, your lungs take oxygen from the air you breathe. As you exhale, your lungs expel carbon dioxide and other gasses your body doesn't need.

During an asthma attack, the airways in your lungs become inflamed, swollen, and clogged with mucus. Because of this, there is less room inside your airways for oxygen and carbon dioxide to pass in and out, and breathing becomes more difficult.

Asthma attacks typically happen when you are exposed to certain triggers. Asthma triggers differ from person to person. If you have asthma, one of the best ways to keep it under control is to figure out and then avoid whatever sets off your asthma attacks.

Asthma Symptoms

Be sure to let your healthcare provider know if you experience any asthma symptoms, including:

- Shortness of breath or feelings of breathlessness, especially in the morning or evening
- Coughing, especially at night and in the morning
- Trouble breathing
- Wheezing
- Pain or tightness in your chest
- Difficulty sleeping due to problems with breathing, coughing, or wheezing

WHAT ARE THE MOST COMMON ASTHMA TRIGGERS ?

Common asthma triggers include:

Smoke

Smoking (cigarettes, pipes, and cigars) and being exposed to secondhand smoke can both cause asthma attacks. Smoke from indoor wood stoves, fireplaces, and kerosene heaters can also bother people with asthma.

Dust

Tiny bugs called dust mites are found in every home, especially in rugs, pillows, mattresses, and blankets. Protect yourself from dust mites by washing bed sheets frequently in hot water, getting rid of rugs, and using mattress and pillow covers.

Air pollution

Airborne pollution and exhaust from cars, factories, and other sources can trigger asthma. Local news reports give updates on air pollution in your area.

Pollen

The dusty powder released by trees, grasses, and other plants can cause allergic reactions that contribute to asthma.

Indoor mold

Humidity and moisture can cause the growth of mold in bathrooms, basements, and other damp places. Mold is a huge trigger for asthma.

Pet dander

Microscopic cells from the skin of pets can trigger allergies and asthma.

Cockroaches

The droppings left behind by these unwelcome visitors are a major asthma trigger.

Respiratory infections

Having a cold, flu, or other respiratory infection raises your chances of having an asthma flare-up.

Hay fever or other respiratory allergies

People with allergies are more likely to develop asthma, and asthma attacks are more common during allergy season.

Other triggers

Some people find their asthma acts up in the presence of strong smells from perfume or other sources, changes in weather or humidity, eating certain foods, and even feeling strong emotions



WHO GETS ASTHMA ?

Asthma is a very common disease, and many people have it. In the U.S., nearly 19 million adults and 7 million children have asthma. It is more likely to occur in women than men, but among children, it's more common in boys than in girls. People in certain ethnic groups have higher rates of asthma—for example, African American children are twice as likely as Caucasian children to have asthma. Certain lifestyle factors, such as smoking and being obese, also raise asthma risk.

HOW DO I KNOW IF I HAVE ASTHMA ?



The best way to know for sure is to have a check-up with your healthcare provider. Make sure to tell your provider about any asthma symptoms you might have. During your check-up, your provider may do pulmonary function tests to measure how well your lungs are working. (The word “pulmonary” means “relating to the lungs.”)

One of the tools your provider may use to check your lungs is a spirometer. When you blow into a spirometer, it measures the amount of air you can push out of your lungs. Sometimes healthcare providers use a spirometer before and after administering asthma medication, to see if the medication helps improve your breathing.

Your provider may also ask you to blow into a handheld device called a peak flow meter. A peak flow meter measures how much air you can push out of your lungs in a fast blast. People with asthma use peak flow meters to keep track of how well they can breathe on a day-to-day basis.

WHAT IS EXERCISE- INDUCED ASTHMA ?

Some people experience asthma only after physical activity or exertion. This is called exercise-induced asthma. Some people have exercise-induced asthma at any time of year. Others experience it only during certain seasons, times of day, or weather conditions. Most people with exercise-induced asthma can continue to enjoy physical activity if they follow their asthma action plan and take the asthma medications prescribed by their healthcare providers.

HOW IS ASTHMA TREATED ?

There is no cure for asthma. However, people with asthma can work with their healthcare providers to find the best ways to manage their disease and prevent attacks. Most people with asthma can live a full, active life.

If you have asthma, it's important to work closely with your healthcare provider to manage your asthma and put an individualized asthma action plan into place. As part of the plan, your provider will educate you about recognizing asthma symptoms, avoiding asthma triggers, and using a peak flow meter to track your breathing. You'll also learn what to do when an asthma attack strikes.

Your healthcare provider may prescribe medicine to help keep your asthma in control. Several kinds of medicines are used to treat asthma, including pills and inhalers. Some kinds of medication help prevent asthma attacks. Others are taken when an asthma attack occurs.

ALLERGY AND ASTHMA SYMPTOM DIARY

Use this handy chart to keep track of allergy and asthma symptoms. Bring it with you when you visit your healthcare provider.

DATE				
Time of day				
Type of symptom				
How severe was the symptom?				
How long did the symptom last?				
What triggered the symptom?				



Questions for My Healthcare Provider

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