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Please note: This information was as current as we could make it on the date given above. But medical information is always changing, and some information given here may be out of date. For regularly updated information on a variety of health topics, please visit familydoctor.org, the AAFP patient education Web site.

Information from Your Family Doctor

Allergies: Controlling Your Symptoms

Am Fam Physician. 2011 Mar 1;83(5):620-621.

What is an allergy?

An allergy is when your body overreacts to things that don't cause problems for most people. These things are called allergens. Some food and medicines can cause serious allergic reactions. Allergens in the air usually cause more common symptoms, such as runny nose, watery eyes, itchiness, sneezing, and dark circles under your eyes.

What are the most common allergens?

- Tree pollen (late April and May), grass and weed pollen (late May to mid-July), and ragweed (late August until first frost).
- Mold, usually where water collects, such as shower curtains and damp basements. It can also be found in compost piles and leaf litter.
- Proteins, or dander, found in the skin, saliva, and urine of furry pets such as cats and dogs.
- Dust and dust mites, usually found in bedding, mattresses, carpeting, and soft furniture.

Can other things make my symptoms worse?

Yes. Aerosol sprays, humidity, tobacco smoke, and wind can worsen symptoms.

How can I avoid allergens?

Shower or bathe before bedtime to remove pollen and other allergens from your hair and skin. Stay inside on dry, windy days. Keep windows and doors shut, and use an air conditioner at home and in your car.

To reduce mold, remove houseplants and clean shower curtains, bathroom windows, and indoor trash cans often.

To reduce pet dander, use allergen-resistant bedding, bathe your pet often, and use an air filter. If your

allergies are severe, you may need to give your pets away or keep them outside.

To reduce dust mites, remove drapes, feather pillows, soft furniture, non-washable bedding, and soft toys. If possible, remove carpeting. Mop and vacuum regularly. Vacuum soft furniture and curtains, as well as floors. Cover mattresses and pillows with protective covers. Lower the humidity in your home with a dehumidifier.

What medicines can I take to help relieve my symptoms?

Ask your doctor which kind is best for you. Nasal steroids, which can be obtained only by prescription, are the most effective treatments for allergic rhinitis. Antihistamines help reduce sneezing, runny nose, and itchiness. They're more useful if you use them before you're exposed to allergens. Decongestants help relieve stuffy nose. For severe allergies, your doctor may recommend combination treatments, such as nasal sprays, eye drops, and steroids.

Using a salt water solution to wash out the inside of your nose can ease sinus symptoms. This is an easy and safe thing to try before you use any medicines. You can also use this in addition to your allergy medicines.

What are allergy shots?

These shots contain small amounts of allergens. They're given on a regular schedule so that your body gets used to the allergens and no longer overreacts to them.

Allergy shots are only used when your allergy can be identified and when you can't avoid allergens. It can take months to years to finish treatment, and you may need to have shots throughout your life.

Where can I get more information?

Your doctor

AAFP's Patient Education Resource

<http://familydoctor.org>

American Academy of Allergy, Asthma, and Immunology

<http://www.aaaai.org>

This handout is provided to you by your family doctor and the American Academy of Family Physicians. Other health-related information is available from the AAFP online at <http://familydoctor.org>.

This information provides a general overview and may not apply to everyone. Talk to your family doctor to find out if this information applies to you and to get more information on this subject.

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