

SECTION 5: ALLERGIES AND ASTHMA

THE ASTHMA HANDBOOK



Many people with asthma have allergies that make their asthma worse. If you have allergies and asthma, it's important to:

- know what you're allergic to
- avoid things you're allergic to
- take any prescribed allergy medications
- know what to do if your asthma is getting worse by following your asthma action plan

An allergy is an abnormal reaction by your body when exposed to things that you are sensitive to. The thing that causes this reaction is called an allergen. Allergens can be inhaled, injected, swallowed or touched. There are different levels of allergies. You may be severely allergic to one thing but only mildly allergic to something else.

ALLERGIC REACTIONS IN PEOPLE WITH ASTHMA

Anybody can get allergies, even people who do not have asthma. If you have asthma, allergens can make your airways red, swollen and filled with sticky mucus. Your airways can react as soon as you're near the allergen as well as a few hours later.

Right away, you can have symptoms such as wheezing and shortness of breath. Your airways are extra-sensitive and they can tighten as soon as you start breathing in allergens. These first symptoms can usually be relieved by rescue medication (blue puffer).

A few hours after you breathe in the allergen, you can feel a second wave of symptoms. These symptoms are caused by your airways gradually swelling (inflammation). Because there's a delay before people feel this kind of symptom, it can be hard to recognize what brought on the reaction. Taking a preventer medication on a regular basis will help prevent this reaction from happening and treat the inflammation when it does happen.

What am I allergic to?

Each person has their own set of allergens. They can be allergic to one or to many things. You might be really allergic to cats, but feel fine around pollens. Another person may be really allergic to pollen and mould, but feel fine around cats.

See your doctor to find out what you are allergic to. Your doctor may refer you to an allergist (a specialist doctor who is an expert on allergies.) The allergist will ask you many questions about your medical history, and your home and work environments (where you live and work, what substances you handle, what floor

ALLERGY SYMPTOMS

Allergies can cause many different symptoms. You may have one or more of these symptoms:

- itchy, watery eyes
- itchy, runny nose
- itchy skin
- eczema (rough, red skin)
- hives (swollen mounds on your skin)
- dark circles under and around the eyes
- recurring headaches
- shortness of breath
- wheeze
- cough
- diarrhea
- stomach cramps

coverings, pets, or plants are in your home, and when you notice your symptoms getting worse). The allergist will also do a skin prick or scratch test to see exactly what you're allergic to.

Skin prick or scratch testing. This test usually takes about 20 minutes. The allergist will put tiny drops of possible allergens on the skin on your arm or back. You may be tested for many allergens at once, so you may have rows of tiny drops on your skin. The allergist will then scratch or prick your skin underneath each drop of allergen, so it can get under your skin. The allergist will watch closely to see how your skin reacts to each scratch. There may be redness and swelling in some spots. Based on your skin's reaction and your medical history, the allergist can tell you what you're allergic to.

You can be mildly or severely allergic to something. You may have a small reaction when you're near one of your allergens, but a more serious reaction when you're near another. For example, you may sneeze a bit when you're cutting the lawn, but you're generally okay. However, when you're near a dog, you cough, wheeze and feel awful. Your allergist can tell you which of your allergies are the strongest.

COMMON ALLERGENS AND HOW TO AVOID THEM

Animal proteins (secretions)

Oils from the skin, dander, saliva, urine and feces (poop).

Pet dander is the flakes of skin, hair, feathers of all warm-blooded animals, including dogs, cats, birds, and rodents (mice, hamsters and gerbils). The length of hair doesn't matter.

- Find a loving home for your pet.
- If you keep your pet, keep it out of your bedroom and off the furniture. Have someone else feed and care for your pet.
- Have someone wash and brush your pet every week.

Dust mites

Tiny bugs that feed on skin particles shed by humans.

Dust mites like to gather in warm, moist places with lots of human skin, such as mattresses, pillows, carpet and bedding.

- Cover your mattress and pillow with specially made dust-mite covers or with plastic or vinyl covers. Tape the zipper for a complete seal.
- Wash your bedding in hot water and dry it in a hot dryer every week. Wash stuffed toys in the same way.
- Keep the humidity in your house below 50%. Dust mites don't like to live in a place with low humidity.
- Keep your bedroom free of clutter. Books, boxes and clothes lying around can all collect dust.

People with dust allergies are allergic to the droppings (feces) of dust mites. To get rid of the allergy-causing droppings, you must wash out the existing droppings and kill the mites.

- If you can, remove carpets, rugs, and heavy curtains from your bedroom.
- Vacuum rugs and carpets at least once a week (the person with a dust allergy should not do the vacuuming).
- Avoid giving stuffed toys to children with asthma because they can collect dust.
- Get someone else to dust every week with a damp cloth. If you must dust, wear a N95 respirator (you can purchase one at a hardware store for about \$2.00) or a strip of damp, clean cotton over your face as you dust.

Pollen

Spores produced by grasses, weeds, flowers, trees and other plants.

- Close your windows to keep pollen out.
- Avoid hanging clothes outside to dry as pollen will cling to clothing and be carried inside.
- In hot weather, spend more time indoors where there is an air conditioner.
- Avoid being outside in humid weather, especially when pollen counts are highest.
- Check the pollen counts in your area to see when the pollen you're allergic to is at its worst.
- If you've been outside at a time of high pollen counts, take a shower to wash the pollen out of your skin and hair, and change into clean clothes.

Mould

Spores produced by fungus. Mould exists indoor and outdoors. It usually exists in hot and humid places. It can live year-round on plants and animals.

Outdoor mould:

- Keep windows closed during times of high humidity.
- Avoid outdoor activities, like cutting grass, raking or handling hay. If you can't avoid these activities, wear a mask.

Indoor mould:

- Avoid using a humidifier. If you must, then make sure that the indoor humidity is less than 50%.
- Use an air conditioner or dehumidifier in the summer.
- Ventilate your home properly.
- Heat all rooms in cold weather.
- Get rid of mouldy food.
- Avoid carpeting in bedrooms and bathrooms.
- Use exhaust fans when cooking and showering.
- Avoid sleeping in the basement if possible.

FOOD AND DRINK THAT CAN CAUSE ALLERGIES

Food is not a common asthma trigger. Food allergies mostly affect children. Food reactions can be mild or severe. Common foods that cause allergies are peanuts, tree nuts, fish and shellfish, milk and eggs.

What to do if you have food allergies

- Know what you are allergic to and avoid it.
- If you have a severe allergy, carry an emergency kit that includes medication and an EpiPen. Make sure you know how to use them.
- With a severe reaction, use your EpiPen immediately (if you have one), call 911 and go to a hospital immediately.
- Wear a Medic Alert bracelet.
- Avoid cutting boards, cutlery, plates and anything that has come into contact with the food you are allergic to. Even small amounts of the food can cause a severe reaction.
- Use caution when eating anything that has not been prepared by you.
- Ask questions about ingredients and how the food was cooked.
- Always check ingredient lists. Some allergic reactions can result from eating foods with preservatives (beer, wine, dried fruit, frozen seafood, some salad bars and frozen French fries).

MEDICATION TO TREAT ALLERGIES

The best way to treat allergies is to stay away from the things that you are allergic to. No treatment will work as well as simply avoiding the allergen in the first place. If you can't avoid an allergen, you may need medication specific to the symptoms and, in some cases, allergy shots.

Nasal allergy treatment

Nasal corticosteroids:

- require a prescription from your doctor
- work by spraying the medication in your nose
- reduce the swelling inside your nose

Antihistamines

- don't require a prescription (can be bought over-the-counter)

- counteracts the histamine released in the body, which causes many symptoms
- may cause drowsiness and may make stuffiness worse

Decongestants

- do not require a prescription (can be bought over-the-counter)
- reduces congestion (plugged up feeling in your nose and head)
- may not work very well
- should not be taken by people with high blood pressure and heart problems

Always read the label to find out the complete list of ingredients when buying over-the-counter drugs. You can ask your pharmacist for help in understanding what the labels say.

Allergy shots

Allergy shots are a less common way to treat allergies. The idea is that if you inject an allergic person with a little bit of the thing they're allergic to and then their body might learn to be less sensitive to it. Allergy shots don't work for every kind of allergy and they can take a while to start making a difference. Your doctor or allergist can tell you if allergy shots are right for you.

COMMONLY ASKED QUESTIONS ABOUT ASTHMA AND ALLERGIES

Should I get rid of everything in our house that could possibly cause allergies?

No. It is expensive and time-consuming to get rid of all possible triggers from your home. You only need to identify and remove the triggers that affect you.

Should allergy shots be used to treat my asthma?

Allergy shots are not used to treat asthma. They are used to manage specific allergies. You should avoid your triggers and take your regular asthma medication. If you have allergies, and you are thinking about allergy shots, you should speak to your doctor.

What is anaphylaxis?

Anaphylaxis is an extreme reaction of the body's immune system to a particular trigger, such as food, insect stings and medications. Anaphylactic reactions can be mild to

life threatening. The most common food products that cause reactions are peanuts, tree nuts, sesame, soy, fish, wheat, eggs, milk and seafood. The most common insect stings that cause reactions are yellow jackets, hornets, wasps and bees. Some people have severe anaphylactic reactions to natural latex rubber.

Signs and symptoms of anaphylaxis:

- itching of skin and a raised rash (hives)
- flushing, swelling of the tissues of the lips, throat, tongue, hands and/or feet
- wheezing, shortness of breath, coughing, hoarseness
- headache, nausea, vomiting, abdominal cramps
- sense of impending doom, loss of consciousness

WHAT TO DO IF YOU EXPERIENCE SYMPTOMS OF ANAPHYLAXIS

If you experience symptoms, such as swelling of the throat or hives all over your body and/or feeling faint, do the following:

1. Use your EpiPen immediately.
2. Tell someone.
3. Go immediately to a hospital emergency room. **DO NOT DRIVE YOURSELF.**

Here are some suggestions on how to protect yourself:

- Once you have had an anaphylactic reaction to something, you must avoid it.
- Find out from your doctor, pharmacist or certified asthma educator how to use an EpiPen.
- Always carry an emergency kit containing your rescue inhaler, an antihistamine and an EpiPen.
- You should carry an extra EpiPen for every 15 to 20 minutes you are from the nearest emergency services. (For example, if you are one hour away from the nearest hospital, you should have at least three EpiPens with you). The medication in your EpiPen will wear off in 15 to 20 minutes and you may still be in a life-threatening situation.
- Wear a Medic Alert bracelet that says “ANAPHYLAXIS: CARRIES EPIPEN” so others can help you in an emergency.

HOW TO IMPROVE THE AIR QUALITY IN YOUR HOME

Here are some tips on improving the indoor air quality in your home.

When cleaning

- Target items that trap a lot of dust, such as shelves, drapes, and furniture. Don't forget about the dust that collects underneath chairs and other large objects.
- Use a damp cloth (dry dusting just sends most dust back into the air) and work from the top down.
- Regularly replace furnace filters (high efficiency, one-inch pleated filters are preferred).
- If you want to keep magazines and newspapers for a while, store them in a cabinet where they can't collect dust. If you have too many lying around, recycle them.
- If possible, use a central vacuum system. It removes dirt without stirring up microscopic dust particles. The vacuum receptacle is vented outside of the home, keeping the air inside cleaner. If you can't afford a central vacuum system, use a vacuum that uses a high-efficiency vacuum filter bag.

When doing laundry

- Use unscented laundry soap marked with the Canadian Ecologo.
- Instead of using fabric softener, use a half cup of vinegar in the rinse water.
- Make sure that your dryer is vented to the outside and the hose is not blocked.

To control pests

- Clean up promptly after cooking and cover up leftover food.
- Regularly remove your kitchen garbage.
- Identify cracks and other openings that act as entry points for insects into your home, and seal these areas with caulking. If you have trouble with rodents, stuff some steel wool into the cracks where they get in (rodents can't chew through steel wool), or place traps where they enter your home.
- If ants are a problem, try sprinkling cayenne pepper at their point of entry.
- Use pesticide-free glue traps to catch crawling insects. Never use pest strips or other pesticides inside your house.