

## **ALLERGIC RHINITIS (NASAL ALLERGY)**

Allergy is an abnormal response to ordinarily harmless substances.

### **SYMPTOMS**

The classic signs of nasal allergy include:

- Clear nasal discharge
- Itchy nose
- Sneezing
- Postnasal drip

Other symptoms include:

- Red, watery, itchy eyes
- Chronic coughing or wheezing
- Recurrent sinus infections
- Recurrent middle ear infections (otitis media)

### **TRIGGERS**

Some common triggers of allergic rhinitis include:

- Pollen
- Dust
- Mold
- Animal dander
- Feathers in pillows and comforters

### **HEREDITY**

Allergic rhinitis tends to run in families. It is estimated that 70% of allergy sufferers have some family history of allergy. If one parent has allergies, there is a 25% chance the child will have allergies. If both parents have allergies, the chance rises to above 60%.

### **TREATMENT**

- **Avoidance** - The best way to treat allergies is to avoid those substances that cause them. If your child is allergic to feather pillows or comforters, get rid of them. If dust causes a problem you should cover mattresses and pillows with allergy-proof covers, minimize stuffed animals and fabric toys in the bedroom, damp wipe tables and blinds frequently, and keep closet doors closed. Running a humidifier all the time is not recommended as

## Allergic Rhinitis

Page 2 of 3

this promotes dust mite growth. Keep bedrooms free of clutter, which invites dust. Wood or tile floors are preferable to carpets.

Damp cellars, barns, and piles of leaves should be avoided if mold causes symptoms.

On days with high pollen counts, encourage your child to play indoors between 5am and 10am when pollen levels peak. A shower or bath each night will help wash away any pollen left on the hair or skin. Keep windows closed and the air conditioner turned on, especially in your child's bedroom. Keep your child away from freshly cut grass.

If you have family pets, never let them go in the child's bedroom; cats are more of a problem than dogs. Washing cats and dogs frequently can decrease dander (tiny scales from their skin) and lessen the chances of a reaction. It is best to start bathing a cat when he is a kitten so he can get used to the idea.

- **Medications** - Medications are recommended when symptoms interfere with activities or sleep, or when ear or sinus infections occur as a result of chronic congestion.
- **Antihistamines** - these medicines block the action of histamine, a chemical released by cells in response to exposure to an allergy-provoking substance. Histamine causes itching, swelling, and mucus production; antihistamines relieve these symptoms. The sooner these medicines are taken when symptoms start, the better they work. Patients with daily symptoms should take antihistamines every day. Those with more occasional symptoms may take antihistamines on an as-needed basis.

There are various types of antihistamines. Examples of "first generation" antihistamines include Benadryl and Chlortrimeton. These medicines last for about six hours and may cause sleepiness or agitation.

"Second generation" antihistamines are less sedating and last longer, up to 24 hours. Examples include Allegra, Zyrtec and Claritin (over-the-counter, no prescription required, generics available and work just as well while costing less).

Care must be taken to avoid potential drug interactions. Always mention your antihistamine use to your doctor before taking other medicines, especially erythromycin antibiotic and anti-fungal medicines.

- **Singulair** – this is a medication that blocks the production of leukotrienes, chemicals involved in the allergic reaction. Singulair must be used on a daily basis and takes a few days start working. It is available as granules to mix with a beverage, a chewable tablet, or a swallowable tablet. Singulair is also used for controlling asthma.

- **Nasal sprays – Steroid nasal sprays** are a highly effective method for controlling allergy symptoms. These medicines prevent the release of histamine as well as other substances and therefore block symptoms before they start. They are not immediately effective but rather take 1-2 weeks to reach maximum benefit. They must be used on a daily basis throughout the allergy season. Since the steroid medicine is put just where it is needed, the dose is very small and little or none of the drug is absorbed into the system. This results in excellent safety. Examples of these medicines include Nasonex, Rhinocort, Veramyst and Flonase. Generic versions are available for some of these products.

Over-the-counter decongestant nasal sprays such as Afrin or Neosynephrine must be used with caution and are NOT suitable for long-term use since patients become dependent on them and feel worse when they are stopped. We do not recommend that they be used.

Nasal crom spray also prevents release of histamine and other substances but is less effective than the steroid sprays and requires 3-4 doses per day.

Anti-histamine nose sprays are also available – examples are Astelin or Patanase

- **Decongestants** - These cold medicines are not very useful for allergy symptoms and are not recommended.
- **Allergy shots** - This treatment is available to control allergy symptoms and is recommended when the measures listed above are unsuccessful.

## **ALLERGY TESTING**

Allergy testing is helpful for some children but is not always mandatory. Two types are available- blood tests and skin (prick) tests; each has advantages and disadvantages. Testing is most useful if the cause of the symptoms is unclear, if treatment does not result in improvement, or if allergy shots are being considered.

In summary, children and teens affected by nasal allergy need not suffer. By minimizing symptoms, your pediatrician can help you effectively manage your child's nasal allergies.