

Why do we get allergies?



Whether it's caused by pet hair, fabric softener, shellfish, a mosquito bite, or pollen, allergies are quite common and an increasing number of people are sharing in their discomfort and frustration.

According to the World Allergy Organisation (WAO), the prevalence of allergies is increasing dramatically worldwide, so much so that it's become a global public health issue. But why do we get allergies in the first place, especially since they don't seem to serve any real purpose?

Behind an allergic reaction

Allergies occur when the immune system overreacts to harmless substances. Hay fever (allergic rhinitis) is one of the most well-known types. It affects between 10-30% of the global population, says WAO. Other common types include asthma and allergic conjunctivitis (eye infection), as well as food, skin, and insect sting allergies.

If you are allergic, your immune system has flagged 'innocent' substances as invaders and produced antibodies to detect them. The next time you're exposed to them, your immune system takes swift action and during this process, kick-starts those tell-tale allergy symptoms.

They're often mild, for example, an itchy nose, watery eyes, and a swollen insect bite, but they can also be severe enough to lead to potentially life-threatening allergic shock (anaphylaxis).

Allergies are often seen as an inappropriate reaction or a mistake made by the immune system, but our bodies use allergies as protection against unhealthy irritants. It's an evolutionary strategy. Those of us who have them may need them – even though their symptoms make us miserable.

You're never too old to develop allergies

Allergies can hit at any age – and various factors can trigger their onset.

- Exposure to high levels of pollution.
- Moving to a new home that has mould or a different city where you're exposed to different types of pollen.
- Adopting a cat or dog for the first time.
- Pregnancy and menopause.
- Ageing (our immune system becomes more sensitive as we age).
- Viruses like the respiratory syncytial virus that can affect the lungs and breathing passages.

No matter at what age you develop allergies, remember that your body may just be trying to protect you and your health. Speak to your doctor about how you can support the process or treat severe symptoms.