



Allergies

What is an allergy?

An allergy is a condition in which the immune system reacts abnormally to a foreign substance. An allergic reaction occurs when the body overreacts to something that is harmless to most people such as plant pollen, dust mites, mould, insect stings or food.

Interesting fact

The earliest recorded case of an allergy attack was sometime between 3640 and 3300 BC with King Menses of Egypt. He was killed by a wasp sting.

Types of allergies

The most common types of allergies are food allergies, drug allergies, pet allergies, latex allergies, allergic asthma, contact dermatitis, anaphylaxis, allergy to mould and seasonal allergies.

Who can be affected by allergies?

There are a wide number of common allergies and they can affect anybody, from child to adult. While allergies are most common in children, they can appear at any time and any age. Sometimes allergies disappear, only to

return years later. Exposure to allergens at times when the body's defenses are weak, such as after an illness or during pregnancy, also may play a role in developing allergies.

About 30% of South Africans suffer from nasal allergies and an estimated 6% suffer from true food allergies. Approximately 1.8 million children in South Africa have asthma. In the Global Initiative for Asthma report, SA ranked 4th for asthma mortality in the 5-34 year-old age group and 5th for asthma case fatality rates. Allergic Rhinitis (Hay fever) is the most common allergy in South Africa affecting 16 million people.

Symptoms

When the body's immune system sees a substance as harmful and overreacts to it, the symptoms that result are an allergic reaction. The substances that cause allergic reactions are allergens, and these can get into your body many ways.

Symptoms vary depending on the type of allergen but include the following:

- Itchy, watery eyes
- Itchy, runny nose
- Sneezing
- Rashes
- Hives (a rash with raised red patches)
- Stomach cramps
- Vomiting
- Diarrhoea
- Bloating
- Swelling
- Pain
- Tongue swelling
- Cough
- Throat closing
- Wheezing (a whistling sound when you breathe)
- Chest tightness and losing your breath
- Feeling faint, light-headed or "blacking out"
- A sense of "impending doom"

Treatment

Treatment of allergies is dependent on your medical history, results of your allergy tests and how severe your symptoms are. Treatment includes: avoiding allergens, medicine options and/or immunotherapy (allergens given as a shot or placed under the tongue).

There are many prescription and over-the-counter medications that help relieve allergic reactions. Here are a few of the well-known ones, but if you suffer from allergies it's best to talk to your GP first, before using any medicine.

- Nasal corticosteroids are nose sprays that reduce swelling and can alleviate nasal allergy symptoms.
- Antihistamines block histamine, a trigger of allergic swelling. They can calm sneezing, itching, runny nose and hives.
- Mast cell stabilizers keep your body from releasing histamine.



- Decongestants reduce stuffiness by shrinking swollen membranes in the nose. It's advised not to use decongestants for more than three days in a row as it may cause the swelling to your nose to get worse.
- Corticosteroid creams or ointments relieve itchiness and stop the spread of rashes. Oral corticosteroids may be prescribed to reduce swelling and stop severe allergic reactions.
- Epinephrine comes in a pre-measured and self-injectable device. It is the most important medicine to give during a life-threatening anaphylaxis (severe allergic reaction). To work, you must get an epinephrine shot within minutes of the first sign of serious allergic reaction. It treats life-threatening allergic reactions to food, stinging insects, latex and drugs/medicines.

The above listed medicines can cause serious side effects. You should not take any allergy medicine without first being examined and advised by a medical professional. Expect your doctor to carefully monitor you while taking it.

