

If you need advice on taking over-the-counter medicines speak to a pharmacist or call the Consumer Health Information Centre's Over-the-Counter Medicines Advice Line on **020 8742 7042**.

The advice line is open from 10am - 3pm Monday to Fridays and calls are charged at standard national rate. Copies of the leaflet "Getting the best from medicines you buy" can also be downloaded from the CHIC website at www.chic.org.uk.

Guide *to* Allergies



This information leaflet has been produced by CHIC (the Consumer Health Information Centre), an advice service to help you understand and treat everyday healthcare problems.



www.chic.org.uk

A guide to allergies

www.chic.org.uk

Introduction

More and more people are suffering from an allergy; estimates suggest that as many as one in three of us experiences allergies. So whether it is you, your partner, child or friend - this booklet will provide you with all the information you need about allergies and how to manage them.

FACT:

Experts suggest that a third of the population has an allergy - and this is estimated to be increasing at 5% each year.

What is an Allergy?

You have an allergy when your body is sensitive to a certain thing that causes your body to react - bringing on any number of a range of symptoms. The allergen, the thing that causes the reaction, differs for different people. Common allergens are pollen, dust, mould, chemicals, medicines, pets and some food. The way your body reacts, and the symptoms that result also differ - they can include a runny nose, wheezing or shortness of breath, sneezing, sinus pain, rash or itchy eyes.

DID YOU KNOW...

The UK reports the highest level of allergies in Europe.

When your body comes in contact with the allergen it thinks it is under attack and so reacts by producing a substance called histamine - that is what causes the symptoms to occur. The common treatment for many allergies is antihistamine - that balances the effects of the histamine produced by your body.

Contact with allergen

e.g. pollen, dust mites

Body thinks it's under attack so produces histamine

Symptoms develop

e.g. rash, sneezing

The key to managing your allergy is to know what triggers it and what helps to calm the symptoms when they come on. Knowing the allergen that affects you will mean that you can take steps to avoid it where possible. Also being aware of the treatment that works for you will help you to keep your pain and discomfort to a minimum.

Common Allergies



Seasonal Allergic Rhinitis or Hayfever

What is it?

Seasonal Allergic Rhinitis or Hayfever, is one of the most common allergies and can cause real discomfort. It is an allergic reaction to pollen; so grass, flowers and trees are the culprits! People develop a range of symptoms from hayfever - common ones are sneezing, watery eyes, running nose and sore throat.

FACT:

Evidence of hayfever dates back to the 1800s.

Pollen from flowers, grass and trees is at its worst over the spring and summer months. The level of pollen will also depend on the weather. We all breathe in pollen that is released into the air by plants and flowers - for those of us with hayfever, it can bring on any one of a number of symptoms.



How should I treat it?

The best treatments for hayfever are antihistamines and/or corticosteroids. Antihistamines counteract the histamine that your body produces when in contact with something that triggers your allergy; the histamine brings on the symptoms you suffer. Antihistamines work to block the effect of histamine, thus reducing your symptoms. You can buy antihistamines as a tablet or syrup and there are eye drops, which also include antihistamines.

Corticosteroids - in the form of nasal sprays - will help treat all nose symptoms and reduce inflammation in the nasal passages.

Try a product with a decongestant too if you are suffering from congestion. Talk to your pharmacist about the best product for your symptoms.

Perennial Allergic Rhinitis

What is it?

Dust Allergies

Dust allergies are caused by the body's sensitivity to dust mite droppings. Droppings from dust mites living in furniture, carpets and mattresses are present in the air and are inhaled. Typically effects from house dust mites are at their worst when central heating is on and windows are closed. If you are sensitive to them you will develop symptoms which may include runny eyes and nose, sneezing and itchy eyes.

Pet Allergies

Pet allergies are caused by sensitivity to the hair and skin cells, or dander, of animals. Animal saliva can also cause symptoms in some people. Common symptoms include itchiness, sneezing and wheezing.

Some people develop a skin rash or runny eyes. Most commonly people are affected by dogs, cats, birds, rabbits and horses. Dander from these animals, particularly cats and dogs, can settle on furniture, carpets and on other people's clothes.

DID YOU KNOW...

Experts suggest that in 10 years - half of all people across Europe could have some type of allergy.

How should I treat it?

Both dust and pet allergies are best treated by an antihistamine or corticosteroid nasal spray: some people may also need a decongestant. Talk to your pharmacist about your specific symptoms and most suitable treatment for you.

Common Allergies



Allergic Conjunctivitis

What is it?

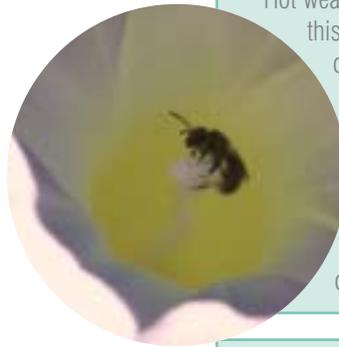
Conjunctivitis is inflammation of the membranes inside the eyelid and over the white of the eye. Allergic conjunctivitis is usually caused by an allergen - often pollen or dust mites. In most cases it causes severe eye itchiness and red-eye. There may also be a discharge from the eye. In many cases allergic conjunctivitis is related to pollen so occurs during the spring and summer months.

How should I treat it?

Drops containing antihistamines or anti-inflammatory substances are the most effective treatment for allergic conjunctivitis and they may need to be continued for some time until the allergy clears. Your pharmacist will be able to advise you on the most suitable eye drops. It is important that you identify the trigger for your allergy and avoid it to limit recurrence of allergic conjunctivitis.

FACT:

Researchers report that 70% of people with an allergy say that it has an adverse impact on their life.



THE MOST COMMON SKIN ALLERGIES INCLUDE:

Contact Dermatitis

This is brought on by touching a certain thing that causes the allergy - this could include metals, plants, pets or chemicals. In most cases a red rash develops.

Prickly Heat

Hot weather can induce a red rash in some people - this is known as prickly heat and in most cases causes itchiness. It is thought that it is caused by sweat being trapped under the skin.

Bites or Stings

Insect bites and stings can cause symptoms, including itchiness and soreness. In most cases these clear relatively quickly.

Urticaria

This is caused by taking a certain drug or eating a certain food. A red rash develops, usually with a raised centre and in most cases causing itchiness. It is sometimes referred to as nettle rash, although it is not related to nettles.

Skin Allergy

What is it?

Our skin sometimes reacts to allergens in the environment - these could be any number of a range of things: heat, animals, clothing, food or plants. In most cases a rash, usually itchy, develops when it comes in contact with the allergen, and the skin may puff up. Some people's skin will react only where it has come in contact with the allergen, other people will experience symptoms across their body.

How should I treat it?

Antihistamines are the best treatment for skin allergies - oral tablets are usually the most effective but an antihistamine lotion or cream applied to the affected area may also be helpful. Discuss your symptoms with your pharmacist to help identify the best treatment for you.

If your skin allergy does not clear up - visit your GP who may suggest a skin test to pinpoint the cause of the allergy.

Common Allergies

Food Allergy

What is it?

Generally, food allergies are most common in young children, and most will outgrow the allergy. A few foods are responsible for most of these allergic reactions. It is estimated that the following are responsible for up to 90 per cent of food allergies:

- Peanuts
- Nuts from trees (almonds, Brazil nuts, hazelnuts and walnuts)
- Fish
- Shellfish (mussels, crab and shrimps)
- Milk
- Eggs
- Soya
- Wheat

DID YOU KNOW...

Estimates suggest that in the UK in excess of one million people have a food allergy.

A food allergy can result in a number of symptoms including vomiting, diarrhoea, and a rash on the skin or asthma.

Some people have an intolerance to certain foods - this is not a food allergy. Common food intolerances include gluten in wheat products - known as coeliac disease - and lactose. Visit your GP if you think you have a food intolerance.

How should I treat it?

Once the food that triggers the allergy has been identified, it must be removed from the diet to avoid future occurrences.

What can you do - treatments

As you now know, your body produces histamine when it is under attack from an allergen - and this is what causes your symptoms to occur. The best treatments are antihistamines that balance the effect of the histamine produced by your body and/or corticosteroid nasal sprays that help reduce inflammation. Depending on your symptoms, a decongestant may also help. Explained below are the most common treatments.

For further information on OTC product treatments visit www.medicinechestonline.com

ASK YOUR PHARMACIST

Talk to your pharmacist about the best treatment for you. Some antihistamines may make you feel drowsy and some treatments might not be suitable if you are on other medication or if you are pregnant. Your pharmacist will be able to advise on the best treatment for you.

Antihistamines

Antihistamines are effective in reducing a runny nose and eyes, sneezing and itchy nose and throat. To work best they should be taken prior to the onset of symptoms - not after. So, for example, if you know that you always get hayfever at the same time each year, you should start taking an antihistamine a few days before you would expect the symptoms to start.

There are a range of capsules, tablets and syrups available to treat allergies in addition to nasal antihistamine products designed for alleviating congestion, and for a running or itchy nose.

Antihistamine sprays should be taken at the start of the hayfever season as they take some days to take effect. You can continue to use these throughout the season.

Eye drops with antihistamines will counteract watering or itchy eyes.

Creams and lotions with antihistamines may also help alleviate symptoms of skin allergies.



Decongestants

Capsules, tablets, liquids and nasal sprays containing decongestants can help to relieve a blocked or stuffy nose. They won't work to relieve the allergy itself unless used in conjunction with an antihistamine.

Nasal Sprays

You can buy nasal sprays with antihistamines, corticosteroids or with decongestants. Decongestant sprays to relieve a blocked nose should only be used for a week at a time. Corticosteroid sprays should be taken at the start of the hayfever season as they take some days to take effect. You can continue to use these throughout the season.

Eye Drops

Also available are eye drops with anti-inflammatory ingredients that can help soothe itchy and sore eyes.

What can you do - lifestyle changes

The key to controlling your allergy is knowing what triggers it; what is the allergen that affects you? It should be easy to pinpoint this once you have had a few allergic outbreaks. There are things you can do to limit future recurrences.

Once you have identified what triggers your allergy - avoid contact with it.

To limit a **pet allergy**:

- Vacuum frequently to collect animal skin and hair - do so in particular places where your pet sleeps, for example the sofa
- Where possible keep pets out of bedrooms and living areas
- Washing your pet often will help limit the hair and skin cells they shed in your home.



If **house dust mites** trigger your allergy then try the following:

- Choose blinds for your windows rather than curtains
- Spray blinds or curtains with water to prevent dust collecting
- Go 'post-modern' with your furniture - wood, other hard materials and leather harbour less dust and allergens than soft upholstery
- Buy covers for your mattress that are designed for allergy sufferers
- Wash sheets and pillow cases on a hot cycle with plenty of detergent
- Vacuum carpets and mattresses regularly.



For **hayfever**:

- Keep an eye on the pollen count, usually featured on television weather reports and in newspapers during the spring and summer months
- Think about taking hayfever remedies early on - talk to your pharmacist about the best types for preventative care
- Be aware that pollen counts are usually higher during the day - before 9am and then from 3pm to 7pm
- If you need to mow your lawn, do so at the end of the day, during early evening
- Vacuum regularly to collect pollen particles
- Where possible sleep with your window closed
- Wearing sunglasses can help people whose eyes suffer badly from hayfever
- If you have air conditioning in your car, use it during the hayfever season.

If you suffer from a **skin allergy**:

- Avoid the allergen that triggers your symptoms
- If you can't avoid contact with the allergen, try not to touch it and cover your arms and legs.



IT IS IMPORTANT TO REMEMBER THAT MOST ALLERGY SYMPTOMS CAN BE TREATED QUICKLY AND EASILY SO THERE IS NO NEED TO SUFFER IN SILENCE.