

Allergies in Children

What are allergies?

Allergies are physiological reactions caused when the immune system reacts to a specific foreign substance (allergen).

Allergies can affect anyone. Generally, allergies are more common in children; however, a first-time occurrence can happen at any age or recur after many years of remission.

Food allergies are seen in 8 percent of children younger than 6.

According to the latest available statistics from the American Academy of Allergy, Asthma and Immunology and the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, allergic problems in the U.S. are the sixth leading common cause of chronic disease.

Normally, the human body defends itself against harmful substances such as viruses or bacteria, but sometimes, the defenses aggressively attack usually innocuous substances such as dust, mold or pollen.

The immune system generates large amounts of the antibodies called immunoglobulin E (IgE) to attack and destroy the supposed enemy. Each IgE antibody specifically targets a particular allergen—the substance that triggers the allergic reaction. In this disease-fighting process, inflammatory chemicals, including histamines, cytokines and leukotrienes, are released or produced, and some unpleasant and, in extreme cases, life-threatening symptoms may be experienced by an allergy-prone person.

What are allergic reactions?

An allergic reaction may occur in the skin, eyes, lining of the stomach, nose, sinuses, throat and lungs—places where immune system cells are located to fight off invaders that are inhaled, swallowed or come in contact with the skin.

Reactions may result in the following allergy symptoms:

- Rhinitis: nasal stuffiness, sneezing, nasal itching, nasal discharge, itching in ears or roof of mouth
- Allergic conjunctivitis: red, itchy, watery eyes
- Atopic dermatitis: red, itchy, dry skin
- Urticaria: hives or itchy welts
- Contact dermatitis: itchy rash
- Asthma: airway problems, including shortness of breath, coughing, wheezing

What causes allergic reactions?

Although hundreds of ordinary substances could trigger allergic reactions, the most common triggers, called allergens, include the following:

- Pollens
- Molds
- Dust mites
- Animal protein (dander, urine, oil from skin)
- Foods
- Medicines
- Feathers
- Insect stings
- Cockroaches

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Who is affected by allergies?

Allergies can affect anyone, regardless of age, gender, race or socioeconomic status. Generally, allergies are more common in children. However, a first-time occurrence can happen at any age or recur after many years of remission.

There is a tendency for allergies to occur in families although the exact genetic factors that cause it are not yet understood. Often, the symptoms of allergies develop gradually over a period of time.

Allergy sufferers may become so accustomed to chronic symptoms such as sneezing, nasal congestion or wheezing that they do not consider their symptoms to be unusual. Yet with the help of an allergist, these symptoms can usually be prevented or controlled and quality of life greatly improved.

For more information go to: <http://www.choa.org/correct.aspx?aspxerrorpath=/default.aspx>

