

Allergies: They're nothing to sneeze at!

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Are a runny or stuffy nose, itchy and watery eyes and stuffed-up head getting you down? Do you frequently come down with colds, sinus infections or ear infections? Are you experiencing difficult-to-control asthma symptoms or daytime fatigue? If your answer is yes to any of these questions, you may have allergic rhinitis.

More than 50 million Americans, 17 to 20 percent of the population, suffer from this condition. Because of its high prevalence, allergic rhinitis adversely impacts the quality of life for many individuals, causing absenteeism from work and school. This results in many direct and indirect costs to consumers -- some estimate up to \$2.4 billion in direct costs alone. Additionally, having untreated allergic rhinitis may further aggravate other conditions such as asthma, sinus disease, ear infections and the common cold.

Allergic rhinitis is caused by a Type I Immediate Hypersensitivity reaction. Exposure to environmental antigens such as tree, grass and weed pollens, molds, dust mites and animal dander results in symptoms of sneezing, congestion and runny nose. Allergic rhinitis commonly is treated with corticosteroid or antihistamine nasal sprays, oral decongestants and oral antihistamines.

Individuals with perennial allergic rhinitis are affected year-round by dust mites, animal dander or saliva, mold spores or certain insects. Those with seasonal allergic rhinitis are affected during the peak pollen seasons for tree, grass or weed pollens or mold spores. A condition called nonallergic rhinitis is caused by nonorganic triggers such as strong odors, stress or changes in weather, including temperature, barometric pressure or humidity.

Nonallergic rhinitis is treated differently from allergic rhinitis. Oral antihistamines often are not helpful and may cause unwanted side effects such as drowsiness and daytime fatigue.

When it is unclear what type of rhinitis is affecting an individual, or treatment has been unsuccessful, allergy skin testing or a blood test for certain allergies may be ordered by your healthcare provider. It is helpful to determine whether you have nonallergic rhinitis in order to avoid unnecessary use of allergy medications, such as sedating-type antihistamines.

If you are suffering with frequent allergy symptoms and find that over-the-counter products are ineffective or cause unwanted side effects, see your healthcare provider. The right treatment will bring about the fewest side effects, the greatest cost savings and improved quality of life.

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