

Allergy Awareness

At least one out of every five Americans suffers from allergies. Common causes of allergy symptoms include food allergies such as peanut allergy or milk allergy, and seasonal allergies resulting from grass, weed, tree pollen, or various molds. Cat allergies and dog allergies can also cause miserable symptoms such as itchy eyes, sneezing, nasal congestion, and wheezing. Allergic skin conditions can cause a rash and itchy skin.

What Is an Allergy?

Allergies are an abnormal response of the immune system. People who have allergies have an immune system that reacts to a usually harm-



less substance in the environment. This substance (pollen, mold, and animal dander, for example) is called an allergen.

Allergies are a very common problem, affecting at least two out of every ten Americans.

What Are the Symptoms of an Allergic Reaction?

Common symptoms of an allergic reaction to inhaled or skin allergens include:

- Itchy, watery eyes
- Sneezing
- Itchy, runny nose
- Rashes
- Feeling tired or ill
- Hives (a rash with raised red patches)

Other exposures can cause different allergic reactions:

- Food allergies. An allergic reaction to food allergens can also cause stomach cramps, vomiting, or diarrhea.
- Insect stings. The allergic reaction to a sting from a bee or other insect causes local swelling, redness, and pain.

The severity of an allergic reaction's symptoms can vary widely:

- Mild symptoms may be almost unnoticeable, just making you feel a little "off."
- Moderate symptoms can make you feel ill, as if you've got a cold or even the flu.
- Severe allergic reactions are extremely uncomfortable, even incapacitating.

Most symptoms of an allergic reaction go away shortly after the exposure stops.



(Over)

Allergy Awareness (Continued)

The most severe allergic reaction is called anaphylaxis. In anaphylaxis, allergens cause a whole-body allergic reaction that can include:

- Hives and itching all over (not just in the exposed area)
- Wheezing or shortness of breath
- Hoarseness or tightness in the throat
- Tingling in the hands, feet, lips, or scalp

Anaphylaxis is life-threatening and requires immediate medical attention. Symptoms can progress rapidly, so head for the emergency room if there's any suspicion of anaphylaxis.

What Causes Allergies?

If you have allergies, you might blame the allergens -- the pollen in the air, your best friend's cat -- for your symptoms.

But actually, most allergens are themselves harmless innocents. What really causes allergic reactions is your own immune system. It mistakes these innocuous allergens for a serious threat and attacks them. The symptoms of an allergy are the result of a body's misguided assault.

Does Everyone Have Allergies?

No, not everyone has allergies. People inherit a tendency to be allergic, although not to any specific allergen.

Who Gets Allergies?

Your risk of developing an allergy starts in your genes. While specific allergies are not inherited, a tendency toward having allergies is. Children with one allergic parent have a 33% chance of developing allergies; with two allergic parents, it's a 70% chance.

Just being predisposed isn't enough. Even the most allergy-prone people don't develop allergies to everything. The circumstances have to be just right for a potential allergen to trigger an allergic reaction.

A lot remains mysterious about just what causes allergies to develop. But it does seem that your current health may have an impact. For instance, if you come into contact with an allergen when you're weak -- say, after a viral infection -- you might be more likely to develop an allergy to it.

How to Prevent Allergies

How do people find the cause of allergies? Most learn to recognize their allergy triggers; they also learn to avoid them in the name of allergy prevention. An allergy specialist (allergist) may be able to help identify your triggers. Several different types of allergy tests are used to do this.

Skin testing is the most widely used and the most helpful in finding the cause of allergies.

Blood tests (RAST) generally identify IgE antibodies to specific antigens, or allergy triggers.

Other tests involve eliminating certain allergens from your environment and then re-introducing them to see if a reaction occurs.

People with a history of serious or anaphylactic reactions may be prescribed an auto-injector, sometimes called a bee-sting kit or EpiPen. This contains a premeasured dose of epinephrine. You carry this with you and inject yourself with medication immediately if you are exposed to a substance that causes a severe allergic reaction.

Source: webmd.com

Welcome

Betty Apt

Betty Apt has joined CTSI as a CHP Benefits Administrator. Betty has more than 20 years of experience in benefit administration and customer service.

