



Rhinitis

Allergies, including allergic rhinitis, affect an estimated 40 million to 50 million people in the United States. Some allergies may interfere with day-to-day activities or lessen the quality of life.

The allergist-immunologist, with his or her specialized training and expertise in managing allergies, allergic rhinitis and asthma, can develop a treatment plan for your individual condition. The goal will be to enable you to lead a life that is as normal and symptom-free as possible.

What Is Rhinitis?

Rhinitis is a term describing the symptoms produced by nasal irritation or inflammation. Symptoms of rhinitis include runny nose, itching, sneezing and stuffy nose due to blockage or congestion. These symptoms are the nose's natural response to inflammation and irritation, and they are often associated with itching of the eyes.

Arbitrarily, rhinitis lasting less than six weeks is called acute rhinitis, and persistent symptoms are called chronic rhinitis. Acute rhinitis is usually caused by infections or chemical irritation. Chronic rhinitis may be caused by allergy or a variety of other factors.

The nose normally produces mucus, which traps substances like dust, pollen, pollution and germs, such as bacteria and viruses. Mucus flows from the front of the nose and drains down the back of the throat. When mucus production is excessive, it can flow from the front, as a runny nose, or become noticeable from the back, as post-nasal drip. Nasal mucus, normally a thin, clear liquid, can become thick or colored, perhaps due to dryness, infection or pollution. When post-nasal drip is excessive, thick or contains irritating substances, cough is the natural response for clearing the throat.

Itching and sneezing are also natural responses to irritation caused by allergic reactions, chemical exposures including cigarette smoke, temperature changes, infections and other factors.

The nasal tissues congest and decongest periodically. In most people, nasal congestion switches back and forth from side to side of the nose in a cycle several hours long. Some people, especially those with narrow nasal passages, notice this nasal cycle more than others. Strenuous exercise or changes in head position can affect nasal congestion. Severe congestion can result in facial pressure and pain, as well as dark circles under the eyes.

What Is Sinusitis?

Sinusitis is inflammation or infection of any of the four groups of sinus cavities in the skull,



which open into the nasal passages. Sinusitis is not the same as rhinitis, although the two may be associated, and their symptoms may be similar. The terms "sinus trouble" or "sinus congestion" are sometimes wrongly used to mean congestion of the nasal passage itself. Most cases of nasal congestion, though, are not associated with sinusitis.

What Is Allergic Rhinitis?

Known to most people as hay fever, allergic rhinitis is a very common medical problem affecting more than 15 percent of the population, both adults and children.

Allergic rhinitis takes two different forms: seasonal and perennial. Symptoms of seasonal allergic rhinitis occur in spring, summer and/or early fall and are usually caused by allergic sensitivity to pollens from trees, grasses or weeds, or to airborne mold spores. Other people experience symptoms year-round, a condition called "perennial allergic rhinitis". It's generally caused by sensitivity to house dust mites, animal dander and/or mold spores. Underlying or hidden food allergies are sometimes a cause of perennial nasal symptoms.

Some people may experience both types of rhinitis, with perennial symptoms worsening during specific pollen seasons. As will be discussed later, there are also other causes for rhinitis.

What Causes the Sneezing, Itchy Eyes and Other Symptoms?

When a sensitive person inhales an allergen (allergy-causing substance) like ragweed pollen, the body's immune system reacts abnormally with the allergen. The allergen binds to allergic antibodies (immunoglobulin E) that are attached to cells that produce histamine and other chemicals. The pollen "triggers" these cells in the nasal membranes, causing them to release histamine and the other chemicals. Histamine dilates the small blood vessels of the nose and fluids leak out into the surrounding tissues, causing runny noses, watery eyes, itching, swelling and other allergy symptoms.

Antibodies circulate in the blood stream, but localize in the tissues of the nose and in the skin. This makes it possible to show the presence of these antibodies by skin testing, or less commonly, by a special IgE allergy blood test. A positive skin test mirrors the type of reaction going on in the nose.

No Hay, No Fever, so Why "Hay Fever"?

"Hay fever" is a turn-of-the-century term that has come to describe the symptoms of allergic rhinitis, especially when it occurs in the late summer. However, the symptoms are not caused by hay (ragweed is one of the main culprits) and are not accompanied by fever. So, the term "allergic rhinitis" is more accurate. Similarly, springtime symptoms are sometimes called "rose fever," but it's just coincidental that roses are in full-bloom during the grass-pollinating season. Roses and other sweet-smelling, showy flowers rely on bees, not the wind, for pollination, so not much of their pollen gets into the air to cause allergies.



Is There Any Escape?

A common question from allergic rhinitis sufferers is: Can I move someplace where my allergies will go away? Some allergens are tough to escape. Ragweed, which affects 75 percent of allergic rhinitis sufferers, blankets most of the United States. Less ragweed is found in a band along the West Coast, the southern-most tip of Florida and northern Maine, but it is still present. Even parts of Alaska and Hawaii have a little ragweed.

Allergist-immunologists seldom recommend moving to another locale as a cure for allergies. A move may be of questionable value because a person may escape one allergy to ragweed, for example, only to develop sensitivity to grasses or other allergens in the new location. Since moving can have a disrupting effect on a family financially and emotionally, relocation should be considered only in an extreme situation and only after consultation with an allergist-immunologist.

Is Allergic Rhinitis Ever the Cause of Other Problems?

Some known complications include ear infections, sinusitis, recurrent sore throats, cough, headache, altered sleep patterns, fatigue, irritability and poor school performance. Occasionally, children may develop altered facial growth and orthodontic problems. Allergy treatment can eliminate or alleviate most of these problems.