Allergies

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About one third of all Americans have some sort of allergy that falls into the category of allergic rhinitis, commonly known as hay fever. Symptoms vary, but usually include any combination of congestion, itchy, runny, sneezy nose and red and swollen, or watery eyes.

But more importantly, allergies can affect the quality of your life.

Why are some people allergic to substances that are harmless to others?
All of our bodies come into contact with foreign substances, called antigens. In some people, the immune system overreacts to certain antigens – which cause an allergic reaction. These antigens, which are called allergens, are most commonly substances that you inhale or eat.

Allergies can trigger an asthma attack, which causes severe airway constriction. In severe allergic reactions to medicines, bee stings or food, you could have experienced an anaphylactic reaction – a severe drop in blood pressure requiring immediate medical attention.

In severe allergic reactions, blood pressure can drop significantly. In these cases it’s essential to seek immediate medical attention.

How do you determine which allergens are affecting you?
A common, effective way is with a skin prick test. A doctor puts a dilute solution of an extract from an allergen, like pollen, on your skin – and then pricks your skin, and waits for a reaction. Several allergens can be tested this way.

In about twenty minutes, the area around one or more substances you’re allergic to will swell and become surrounded by a red ring.

When skin prick tests don’t identify allergens, often the next step is to inject a small amount of each solution into your arm to see if a reaction occurs.

Another diagnostic tool is a blood test. It can identify antibodies that are specific to certain allergens.
Once the allergen is identified, you may be able to prevent reactions by avoiding it. For example, foods, pets or drugs that cause allergies. Or you can use air conditioning in the summer if you are allergic to outdoor pollens.

When avoidance is impossible, as it is with say pollen, another preventive option is allergy immunotherapy – or allergy shots. It’s effective for pollens, animal danders and dust mites, but not for drug or food allergies since you can avoid them altogether and the shots could even cause severe reactions. In the beginning, shots are given once or twice a week. Eventually, when the symptoms are controlled, shots are given every 2 to 6 weeks. And therapy is usually complete after 3 or 4 years.

For many people, treating allergy symptoms is the best option. The allergic reaction isn’t blocked, but itching and sneezing and swelling often are relieved by over-the-counter antihistamines. Some of their side effects, though, can be problematic, especially for older people. Sedation is the major problem, except with the antihistamine - Loratadine. Effects like blurred vision, sleepiness, and constipation can often be avoided by using prescription antihistamines.

It is also important to beware that over-the-counter antihistamines are often combined with decongestants which can cause insomnia or nervousness.

Over-the-counter nasal sprays, or eye drops can help relieve symptoms in the nose and eyes.

Intranasal steroids are the first line of treatment for allergic rhinitis.

And inhaled steroids are the number one treatment for persistent asthma.

People who have severe reactions – to bee or wasp stings, for instance, should carry epinephrine syringes for self injection. Of course, if you experience a severe allergic reaction, you should go to the emergency room for treatment.

The good news is that many allergies can be prevented or treated to keep them from interfering with your life.

To learn more about Dr. Robert Naclerio, visit: http://www.uchospitals.edu/physicians/robert-naclerio.html

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