NASAL ALLERGIES
WHEN NASAL ALLERGIES STRIKE

If you have nasal allergies (also called allergic rhinitis), you’re not alone: Allergies are incredibly common. If your allergies bother you only at certain times of the year, like in the spring when the trees begin to bloom, you have “hay fever”, or seasonal nasal allergies. If your allergies seem to be with you all year long, you have perennial nasal allergies. In either case, you’ll be happy to know that you don’t have to suffer in silence. You and your doctor can develop a plan to keep your allergies under control.

HOW YOU MAY FEEL
If you have nasal allergies, you’re probably familiar with many of the following symptoms: sneezing, itchy nose, eyes, ears, and throat; clear, runny nasal discharge; stuffed up nose; and red, watery eyes. You may not have realized, though, that nasal allergies can also cause sore throats, coughing, tiredness, stomachaches, headaches, and tenderness in your cheeks and forehead. These symptoms may be a minor irritation, or they may disrupt your life. Nasal allergies can cause you to lose sleep, drain your energy, and make it hard for you to concentrate on your work. Your doctor will consider your symptoms when deciding how best to treat your nasal allergies.

CAUSES OF NASAL ALLERGIES
An allergy is sensitivity to a substance called an allergen. Nasal allergies are most commonly caused by one or more of four kinds of allergens: pollen, house-dust mites, mold, and animals. Because pollen is a problem only during certain times of the year, it usually causes seasonal allergies. House-dust mites, mold, and animals may be around all year long, and so usually cause perennial nasal allergies. Other substances, called irritants, can bother the nose and make allergy symptoms worse.

POLLEN
Plants reproduce by moving tiny grains of pollen from plant to plant. Some pollen is carried by bees and some is blown by the wind. It’s the wind-blown pollen that causes nasal allergies. The amount of pollen in the air varies from season to season.

HOUSE-DUST MITES
House-dust mites are tiny bugs too small to see. They can live in mattresses, blankets, stuffed toys, and carpets. The droppings of these mites are a common indoor cause of nasal allergies. These droppings are found in house dust, such as the dust on bookshelves or in curtains.

MOLD
Mold loves dark, damp areas. It tends to grow in bathrooms, basements, refrigerators, and in the soil of houseplants. Mold reproduces by sending tiny grains called spores into the air. If these spores are breathed in, they can cause a nasal allergic reaction.
ANIMALS
Pets such as cats, dogs, birds, horses, and rabbits are common causes of nasal allergies. Flakes of skin (dander, or dandruff), saliva left on fur when an animal cleans itself, urine in litter boxes and cages, and feathers on birds are all substances that can cause nasal allergies.

IRRITANT MAKE ALLERGIES WORSE
Although irritants don’t cause nasal allergies, they can bother the nose and make allergy symptoms worse. Cigarette smoke, perfume, aerosol sprays, smoke from wood stoves or fireplaces, car exhaust, and strong odors are examples of irritants.

WHEN ALLERGENS ENTER YOUR NOSE
What causes a healthy nose to become a stuffed-up, itching, dripping nose? These symptoms happen when allergens enter your nose. Allergens are normally harmless substances that most bodies ignore. When you have allergies, though, your body mistakes allergens for enemies that need to be destroyed. When your body attacks these allergens, the air passages inside your nose become swollen and inflamed, which causes your nasal symptoms. Allergens can also cause symptoms in other parts of your body, like your eyes, ears, and lungs.

AN ALLERGIC REACTION
When you inhale an allergen, it alerts fighting substances called antibodies, which are attached to special cells (mast cells). Allergens stick to these antibodies. When enough antibodies have allergens stuck to them, the cells release a chemical called histamine. This chemical irritates the surrounding nasal tissues, causing allergy symptoms.

NASAL PASSAGES WHEN YOU HAVE ALLERGIES
Swollen sinus tissues may trap fluid, causing pain and headache.

The nose produces extra mucus, which plugs air passages and drips out of your nose.

Mucus drips through the pharynx into your throat (postnasal drip).

Nasal tissues swell, making air passages smaller. Your nose feels stuffed up.

RELATED PROBLEMS
Other problems may occur as a result of allergic irritation and inflammation. If you have one of the following problems, talk to your doctor about treatment options.

Sinus Infections
Bacteria may grow in trapped fluid in the sinuses. These bacteria can cause infection (sinusitis).

Eye Inflammation
Allergens can irritate your eyes, causing them to become red, itchy, puffy, and watery (conjunctivitis).

Nasal Polyps
The nasal tissues may swell so much that they form a small sac, called a polyp. Polyps can grow large enough to block nasal passages.

Ear Problems
The Eustachian tube connects the middle ear to nasal passages. Air passes in and out of the ear through this tube. If an allergic reaction blocks this tube, the trapped air can make the ear feel plugged. Fluid may also build up, leading to an ear infection (Otitis media).

Asthma
When you have asthma, inflammation and swelling of air passages in the lungs can make breathing difficult. This inflammation and swelling is sometimes caused by an allergic reaction.
YOUR EVALUATION
Your doctor will evaluate your symptoms before deciding on the best way to treat your nasal allergies. This includes asking you questions, examining you, and possibly doing some tests. The evaluation tells your doctor more about your allergies and any related conditions.

HISTORY
Your doctor may take your medical history and ask you to describe your symptoms. Be prepared to answer questions like these:
- What are your symptoms?
- What seems to cause them?
- How old were you when your symptoms started?
- What times of year do you have symptoms?
- Does anyone else in your family have allergies?
Your doctor may ask about where you live and work, what your hobbies are, and whether you have any pets. Your doctor will also want to know what you’ve been doing to try to cope with your allergy symptoms.

PHYSICAL EXAM
Your doctor examines your nose, eyes, ears, throat, and skin for signs of allergy or infection. He or she may also listen to your lungs and heart.

LAB TESTS
During the evaluation, your doctor may swab your throat to check for infection or your nose to check for a special kind of white blood cell (eosinophil). Eosinophils may be present in large numbers when you have allergies. You may also have x-rays or a computerized scan (CT scan) taken to detect problems with your sinus cavities or the bones in your nose.

WHAT'S NEXT?
Based on the results of your evaluation, your doctor will suggest a treatment plan. This plan will probably include medications, ways to avoid allergens, and maybe further testing and allergy shots. Your doctor will discuss your evaluation and his or her recommendations with you.

ALLERGY TESTING
If your initial evaluation shows that you may have nasal allergies, skin tests or blood tests may be done. These tests can help identify which allergens you’re sensitive to and aid your doctor in developing a treatment plan.

SKIN TESTING
Skin testing is done right in the doctor’s office. Depending on how many allergens you’re being tested for, testing may take one or more office visits.

BEFORE THE TEST
Some medications can affect the results of skin tests. So ask your doctor how long before testing you should stop taking antihistamines or other medications. Ask your doctor whether testing will be done on the back or the arm. If done on the back, wear a shirt that you can remove. If done on the arm, wear short sleeves or sleeves that you can roll up.

DURING THE TEST
There are two ways to do skin testing for allergies. One way is to inject a tiny amount of the allergen under the surface of your skin. The other way is to place a drop of allergen on the skin and make a small prick. For either method, it takes about 15 to 20 minutes for the skin to react. By looking at the reactions, the doctor can judge whether you’re allergic to a particular allergen.
BLOOD TESTING
The other method of allergy testing is a blood test. This is a simple test where a technician draws some blood from your arm. Then, the number of antibodies in the blood for each type of allergen is measured. A high number of antibodies for a specific allergen mean you’re probably allergic to that substance. One type of blood test is called the RAST.

TIPS FOR CONTROLLING ALLERGENS
Constant exposure to allergens means constant allergy symptoms. That’s why controlling or avoiding the allergens that cause your symptoms is an important part of your treatment. The tips below may help. Don’t try to follow all the suggestions at once --- start by choosing one or two tips for each allergen you’re sensitive to. Then, try a few more. The more you do to keep all allergens away from your nose, the better you’ll feel.

POLLEN
Pollen is in the air whenever trees, grasses or weeds are blooming, so it’s hard to avoid. But there are some things you can do to limit your exposure to pollen:
- Check pollen counts and avoid spending a lot of time outdoors when counts are high. Pollen counts tend to be higher during warm, dry weather. They also tend to be higher during early morning and late afternoon hours. In some areas, daily pollen counts are reported in the paper and on the radio.
- After spending time outdoors, change your clothes, and wash your hair before bed.
- Stay indoors on windy days.
- During the height of the allergy season, try getting away to a place where your allergies won’t bother you as much. Your doctor may have suggestions.

MOLD
If you’re allergic to mold, pay special attention to areas where water tends to collect. Here are some tips for avoiding mold:
- Drain wet areas of your yard, and clean up leaves and weeds before they begin to rot. Keep compost piles away from the house.
- Clean the bathroom shower or tub regularly with bleach, and check the shower curtain for mold growth.
- Get leaky faucets or leaks in the roof fixed right away.
- While bathing or showering, leave a window open or run a fan so moisture can escape.
- If your house is damp, use a dehumidifier.

HOUSE-DUST MITES
House-dust mites are almost impossible to get rid of. But you can keep them under control. Try some of these tips:
- Enclose your mattress, box spring, and pillows in allergy proof casings.
- Wash sheets, blankets, and mattress pads every 1 to 2 weeks in hot water (at least 130º F).
- Remove stuffed animals and things that collect dust, such as wall hangings, knickknacks, and books --- especially in the bedroom.
- Have as little carpeting as possible.
- Each week, have your home dusted with a damp cloth and vacuumed. Use HEPA (high efficiency particulate air) filters or double-ply bags in the vacuum cleaner.
- If someone else can’t dust and vacuum for you, take your medication before doing these tasks. Wearing a filter mask may help.

ANIMALS
The dander, saliva, and urine of animals are all allergens. Cats produce more of these allergens than most other pets. Animal fur may also contain dust, mold, and pollen. The best way to avoid animal allergens is not to have a pet. If you already have a pet and can’t bear to part with it, try to reduce our exposure as much as possible. These tips may help:
- Whenever possible, keep pets outdoors. Never let pets into your bedroom.
- Use air-cleaning unit with a HEPA filter --- especially in bedrooms.
- Wash your hands after you touch a pet, and try to keep pets away from your face.
Bathing pets weekly may cut down on the allergens they make and wash saliva, dust, mold, and pollen off their fur.

**CONTROLLING ALLERGENS WHERE YOU LIVE**

Controlling allergens is the most important in your home, especially in your bedroom. Even a clean home can be full of allergens, so take a moment to see what you can do to cut down on allergens in each room of your home. Don’t forget your car and your work area too. And try to avoid things like cigarette smoke and perfume that can irritate your nose and make your allergies worse.

Buy an air purifier with a HEPA filter. Look in consumer magazines for recommendations. Avoid vaporizers and humidifiers, since they encourage mold and dust-mite growth. Use shades or vertical blinds instead of horizontal blinds, which collect dust. Replace drapes with curtains that can be washed regularly.

Enclose mattresses, box springs, and pillows in allergy-proof casings. Use washable blankets and quilts. Avoid feather pillows, down comforters, and wool blankets.

Avoid yard work that increases your exposure to pollen, like mowing and weed-pulling. If that’s not possible, wear a filter mask. When you're done, change your clothes and wash you hair.

Install a fan to keep the bathroom well ventilated.

Don’t let wet clothing sit and grow mold. And don’t hang clothes outside to dry where they can collect airborne pollen. Dry clothes immediately in a clothes dryer that’s vented to the outside.

Check stored food for spoilage. Clean up spills right away.

Avoid dust-catching clutter. Have enclosed places to keep books, toys, and clothes. Keep closet doors closed.

Use washable throw rugs wherever possible, or have bare floors. Put filters over forced air heating vents. Change the filters regularly.

Keep you car clean. Vacuum the seats and carpets regularly. If you have air conditioning, use it instead of opening the windows.

Keep rain gutters clean. Remove leaves and debris that can grow mold.

**Controlling allergens where you work**

The tips that help you control allergens where you live can also help you control them where you work.

- Dust your work area regularly with a damp cloth
- Keep your work area as uncluttered as possible
- Move plants away from you if you are allergic to mold.
- Use air purifier to clean the air around your work-station if you can.

**AVOIDING IRRITANTS**

Don’t let irritants make you feel worse.

- Don’t smoke. Avoid tobacco smoke whenever possible.
- Don’t use powders and aerosol sprays. They’re very irritating to the nose.
- Use perfumes and cleaners in well-ventilated areas only.
TAKING MEDICATIONS
As you probably know from a trip to the drugstore, you can choose from dozens of over-the-counter medications that are designed to treat allergies. But some allergy medications can only be prescribed by your doctor. Your doctor may recommend over-the-counter medications, prescription medications, or both. Medications are most effective if you use them exactly as your doctor tells you.

ANTIHISTAMINES
Antihistamines are the most common allergy medications. They work by stopping histamine from bothering the nasal tissues. These medications can help prevent symptoms like sneezing, itching, and a runny nose. There are two forms of antihistamines: pills and nasal sprays. You can buy some antihistamine medications without a prescription. Some of them may make you drowsy. Antihistamines\ medications that don’t make you drowsy are available with a prescription from your doctor.

DECONGESTANTS
Decongestants reduce swelling of the nasal tissues, opening up your air passages and relieving sinus pressure. Like antihistamines, decongestants are available with or without a prescription. There are two forms of decongestants: pills and nasal sprays. Use pills for a few days when you need relief, but call your doctor if you need them every day for more than a week. Use over-the-counter nasal sprays only when your doctor recommends them. They can make symptoms worse if they’re overused.

CORTICOSTEROIDS
Corticosteroids are a type of hormone (not the same as anabolic steroids abused by some athletes). They help reduce swelling and relieve itching and sneezing by protecting the nasal tissues from irritation. Corticosteroids are usually sprayed directly into the nose, but they’re different from decongestant nasal sprays you can buy in a store. Corticosteroids nasal sprays must be prescribed by a doctor, and they should be used regularly to be effective. They can have a few side effects such as dryness, bleeding, or burning. If you need a stronger dose of corticosteroids for a short time, your doctor may prescribe them in a pill form.

CROMOLYN SODIUM
Cromolyn sodium nasal spray treats nasal allergy symptoms by helping to prevent cells from releasing histamine. Cromolyn sodium is available over-the-counter. It must be used regularly to be effective. This medication has almost no side effects.

ANTICHOLINERGICS
Anticholinergics nasal spray helps relieve a runny nose by keeping your nose from producing too much mucus. This type of nasal spray is only available with a prescription. Use the spray exactly as directed. It may cause side effects such as dry mouth or dry nose.

SALINE RINSES
Your doctor may suggest that you rinse your nose periodically with salt water (saline solution). This helps soothe and moisturize irritated nasal tissue and cleans out mucus and crusting. You can buy salt-water rinse kits in your local drugstore. If you use both a saline rinse and a nasal spray, use the saline rinse first.

ALLERGY SHOTS
If medications don’t relieve your nasal allergy symptoms, your doctor may recommend allergy shots (also called immunotherapy). Over time, allergy shots may make your body less sensitive to allergens. Sometimes underlying problems in your nose or sinuses can’t be treated with shots or medications. To correct these problems, your doctor may recommend surgery.

WHAT ARE ALLERGY SHOTS?
Allergy shots are injections of solutions containing tiny amounts of the substances you’re allergic to, such as pollen or dust mites. The amount of allergen in the solution is increased slightly each time you get a shot until you reach a certain level (called your maintenance level). Allergy shots are usually given once or twice weekly at first; then the time between the shots is gradually increased until their given once a month. The shots often
continue for three to five years. The purpose of allergy shots is to make you less sensitive to allergens, and many people find that this form of treatment relieves or greatly improves their allergy symptoms.

**PREPARING FOR YOUR SHOTS**
On days that you are scheduled to have shots, wear short sleeves or sleeves that can be rolled up, and take your regular medications. You can’t get your shots on any days that you have a fever, hives, or are wheezing.

**GETTING YOUR SHOTS**
The nurse or doctor will measure the right amount of solution and inject it into the skin of your upper arm. Depending on how many things you are allergic to, you may get one or several shots. You may feel a slight sting in your arm when you get the shot, and your arm may be a little sore for a few hours, but you should feel fine otherwise. You may have a small bump for a few hours where you received the shot. If the bump gets large or your arm swells, tell your doctor.

**AFTER YOUR SHOTS**
After getting your allergy shots, you’ll probably need to sit in the waiting room for about 20 to 30 minutes. This is because allergy shots occasionally cause a reaction (anaphylaxis), which can be treated with an injection of a special medication. Signs of a reaction include:
- Itching, especially on your palms or feet, or in your mouth
- Breaking out in hives
- Repeated sneezing
- Tightness in your throat or chest or trouble breathing

If you notice any of these symptoms while you are in the doctor’s office or during the rest of the day, tell your doctor immediately.

**MAKE A COMMITMENT**
Allergy shots don’t work unless you get them regularly, according to the schedule your doctor provides for you. Before you begin getting shots, commit to your allergy therapy. Make arrangements with your doctor if you know you’ll have to miss any shots.

**SURGERY**
In some cases, surgery is part of your allergy treatment. Surgery can’t cure allergies. But it can be used to remove polyps or other blockages in the nasal passages and to correct underlying problems in the nose or sinuses that may make allergy symptoms worse. If you have a problem that might require surgery, your doctor can give you more information.

**LIVING WITH NASAL ALLERGIES**
Nasal allergy symptoms can be uncomfortable and annoying, but there are things you can do to keep these symptoms under control. Your doctor will work with you to develop a plan for managing your nasal allergies. This plan can relieve your itchy, runny nose, watering eyes, and stuffed-up head, and let you feel and perform your best.