



# ALLERGY SEASON AHEAD

## Allergic rhinitis – stop the symptoms, sooner and later!

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### Introduction

Rhinitis refers to an inflammation of the nasal passages that can cause sneezing, itching, nasal congestion, runny nose, and postnasal drip. When the immune system overreacts to substances in the environment that are normally harmless (called allergens), an allergic reaction can release substances such as histamines that can affect the nose, throat, eyes, ears, skin, and roof of the mouth. This article will focus on the causes, symptoms, and treatment options available for allergic rhinitis.

### Causes

Allergic rhinitis can be caused by allergens in the home or environment and often includes:

- Pollen (from grass, trees, or flowers)
- Droppings from dust mites or cockroaches
- Spores from mould or fungi
- Animal dander (skin flakes, saliva, or urine)

The cause of allergic rhinitis depends on whether an individual is sensitive to that allergen. Therefore, while some patients may be sensitive or allergic to animal dander, others may develop allergic rhinitis following exposure to pollen. Patients may also be allergic to several allergens.

### Symptoms

Symptoms that may occur immediately or shortly after exposure (within 15–30 min) to an allergen may include:

- Itching of the nose, throat, mouth, eyes, or ears

- Sneezing
- Watery eyes
- Runny nose

Over the following hours, patients may experience some of the following symptoms that peak around 6–12 hours after initial contact:

- Nasal congestion (stuffy nose)
- Coughing
- Sore throat
- Clogged ears
- Problems with smell
- Puffiness under the eyes
- Headache

Many people have mild symptoms that can be easily treated. However, for some patients, symptoms can be severe and persistent, waxing and waning throughout the year and can lead to sleeping problems, fatigue and irritability that can interfere with everyday life.

### Management and treatment

#### Avoidance

The first step in managing allergic rhinitis is to avoid known allergens as far as possible. Although complete avoidance is not always possible, some of the following measures may reduce exposure and symptoms:

- Pollen allergies – Stay indoors as much as possible, especially when pollen counts are high.
- House dust mite allergy – Use protective covers on pillows, duvets, and the mattress to reduce exposure to mites; clean floors with a damp mop rather than dry sweeping.
- Mould allergy – Keep humidity in the house low to avoid exposure to mould.

- Allergy to animal dander – Keep pets outdoors as much as possible; wash and rinse allergens off hands and eyes especially after contact with animals or being outside.

## Medication

Rinsing the nose with saltwater (saline) solution can help relieve symptoms by removing allergens. Nasal sprays containing cortisones such as beclomethasone, budesonide, fluticasone or mometasone are often used as first-line treatment of persistent allergic rhinitis. They reduce symptoms of sneezing, itching, runny nose, and nasal congestion by reducing inflammation.

Antihistamines prevent inflammation by blocking the effect of histamine that is released following exposure to the allergen. Antihistamines are available as nasal sprays containing azelastine or levocabastine; or as tablets containing cetirizine, levocetirizine, loratadine, desloratadine or fexofenadine. Rupatadine is an antihistamine that works in more than one way to treat and prevent symptoms presenting in both the early and late phases of allergic rhinitis.

Decongestants such as oxymetazoline, phenylephrine or xylometazoline may be used for short periods (up to five days) to help relieve congestion.

## Conclusion

Allergic rhinitis symptoms can be managed and prevented by avoiding the allergen as much as possible. First-line treatment

for persistent symptoms entails the use of cortisone nasal sprays. Antihistamines used as a nasal spray or oral treatment are also effective in reducing itching, sneezing and a runny nose and may be used with cortisone nasal sprays to provide greater symptom relief. The choice of treatment will depend on the severity of symptoms and may need to be used on an ongoing basis to provide optimal control.

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