

What are Allergies?

Allergies occur when your immune system overreacts to something that is usually harmless – such as pollen, dust, or certain foods. Your body treats the invader like a threat and triggers a reaction. Allergic reactions can range from mild, like sneezing or a rash, to life-threatening. Some people are born with allergies, others develop them later.

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ)

What are food allergies?

Food allergies occur when your body reacts badly to a certain food or ingredient. Symptoms may include:

- Hives (itchy bumps)
- Stomach pain, vomiting, or diarrhea
- Stuffy nose, sneezing, or itchy eyes
- Tingling or swelling

A severe reaction is called anaphylaxis. Signs of anaphylaxis include trouble breathing, hoarse voice or throat tightness, swelling, coughing, a weak pulse, hives, difficulty swallowing, or a combination of symptoms. Call 911 immediately if you suspect anaphylaxis.

What are environmental allergies?

Things like pollen, dust, mold, pet dander, and cockroaches can trigger symptoms including:

- Itchy, watery eyes
- Tiredness or fatigue
- Runny, stuffy nose
- Itchy skin or mouth

How common are allergies?

Very common! Allergies often run in families and can appear at any age. Sometimes allergies can fade and return years later. Substances that cause allergies are called allergens. Common food allergens are eggs, milk, peanuts, tree nuts, fish, shellfish, wheat, soy, and sesame. Environmental allergies can be seasonal. Irritants such as smoke and perfume can cause similar symptoms but are not true allergies.

How can I find out if a reaction is an allergy?

Talk to a medical provider. You might be referred to an allergist for skin or blood tests to diagnose a specific allergy. Allergists can also do food testing. Together, you can develop an allergy action plan.

What kind of treatments are available for allergies?

Avoiding triggers is best, but not always possible. Treatments include:

- Medications: prescription or over the counter.

- Allergy shots: long-term treatment that helps your body get used to what you're allergic to. Frequent shots are given regularly over three to five years. This option is used when an allergen is unavoidable or medication does not work well.

For food allergies: always read labels, let others know about the allergy, and teach children how to stay safe.

For severe allergies: Carry epinephrine (EpiPen) at all times. It's the only treatment for anaphylaxis. Use it right away if there are symptoms – do NOT wait. There are also nasal spray versions of epinephrine available. If a child can't carry their epinephrine, make sure it's available wherever they go (school, sports, etc.).

What other conditions sometimes occur with allergies?

People with allergies may also have asthma or eczema (dry, itchy skin). Food and environmental allergies often occur together.

Talking with a Medical Provider

When talking with a medical provider, you might want to:

- Share photos or descriptions of reactions.
- Discuss how to avoid allergens.
- Create an action plan.
- Ask about epinephrine use and storage.

What You Can Do at Home

Avoid suspected food allergens until you can see a medical provider. Reduce exposure to environmental allergens by:

- Washing bedding and clothes often
- Closing windows during pollen seasons
- Dusting, vacuuming, and changing air filters frequently

Resources and Support in New York State

Search NYS



<https://bit.ly/searchnys>

NYS Department of Health County Programs – CYSHCN



<https://on.ny.gov/43ho1ZK>

ACT for Youth: Allergies



<https://bit.ly/act-allergies>

About This Series

This series of handouts on health conditions was written by clinicians in Weill Cornell Medicine's Pediatric Mental Health Integration Program, partners in the ACT for Youth CYSHCN Program Center of Excellence at Cornell University.

