

Allergic Rhinitis & Sinusitis Handout

Allergic rhinitis describes a condition where symptoms are caused by sensitivity to “allergens” such as dust, mold, pollen, weeds, trees, pets, etc. Common symptoms include: runny nose, nasal obstruction, itchy eyes and throat, sneezing, post-nasal drip, recurrent “colds” or sinus infections.

Many seasonal "colds" are actually allergic rhinitis and will not respond to antibiotics. Allergic rhinitis happens when pollens, animal dander, dust, mold spores, etc., come into contact with the lining of the nose, eyes, or throat. In allergic patients, the immune system is overactive and identifies normally harmless particles as dangerous, producing an excessive reaction that actually causes inflammation. This is known as allergy and the substances causing it are allergens.

Causes of Allergy: Allergens

Certain allergens are always present. These include house dust mites, household pet danders, foods, and mold spores. Symptoms from these are frequently worse in the winter when the house is closed up. Mold spores cause at least as many allergy problems as pollens. Molds are present all year long, and grow outdoors and indoors. Dead leaves and farm areas are common sources for outdoor molds. Indoor plants, old books, bathrooms, and damp areas are common sources of indoor mold growth. Molds are also common in foods, such as cheese and fermented beverages.

Allergy and Sinus Infections

Allergic patients show reduced resistance to respiratory infections, and more severe symptoms when infections occur. A routine viral cold is more likely to progress to an acute or chronic sinus infection in patients with allergies. Allergies and sinus infections often cause lost work days, decreased work efficiency, poor school performance, and a negative effect on the enjoyment of life.

Diagnosing Allergy

If your doctor suspects that allergy is contributing to or causing your symptoms, then allergy testing may be ordered. The most common and accurate method is skin testing: a series of skin injections are administered to check for sensitivity to dust, molds, trees, grasses, weeds, insects, and animals. A blood test may also be obtained which measures antibodies in your blood to the above mentioned allergens (dust, mold, etc.).

Treatment and Medications for Allergy

A number of medications are useful in the treatment of allergy including antihistamines (Claritin®, Allegra®, Zyrtec®, etc), decongestants, and nasal sprays (Nasonex®, Flonase®, Rhinocort, etc.).

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Environmental Controls

The medical management of allergy also includes counseling in proper environmental controls, particularly to reduce dust and mold in your home.

Allergy Shots and Drops (Desensitization Therapy or Immunotherapy)

The best available treatment for allergies is the administration of small quantities of allergens via shots or drops to build up protective antibodies to specific allergens (pollens, molds, animal dander, dust, etc.). Allergy shots are initially administered on a weekly basis and the concentrations of the shots will gradually be increased. Symptom improvement is expected within 4-6 months, and eventually the shots will be given every 2nd to 4th week, called “maintenance therapy.” Allergy shots are usually given for 3-5 years.

Allergy drops (also called sublingual immunotherapy) are extracts of allergens given in a liquid or “drop” under your tongue. They are given on a daily basis, with the concentration of the allergens gradually being increased. Like allergy shots, symptom improvement may be seen within 4-6 months, and daily “maintenance” therapy will continue for several years. Your doctor can help you decide which immunotherapy (shots versus drops) is best for you.

Common reasons why your doctor may order allergy testing for you:

- Nasal obstruction, post-nasal drip, runny nose
- Recurrent or chronic sinus infections
- Nasal polyps
- Recurrent or chronic ear infections
- Chronic laryngitis or throat problems

Prevention Tips

- Wear a pollen mask when mowing grass or house cleaning (most drugstores sell them).
- Change air filters monthly in heating/air conditioning systems.
- Keep windows and doors closed during heavy pollination seasons.
- Rid the home of indoor plants and other sources of mildew.
- Don't allow dander producing animals (i.e. cats, dogs, etc.) in the home.
- Enclose mattress, box springs and pillows in allergy proof covers against dust mites.
- Use antihistamines and decongestants as necessary and as tolerated.
- Observe general good health practices; exercise daily, stop smoking, avoid other air pollutants, eat a balanced diet.
- Consider a humidifier in the winter as dry, indoor heat aggravates many allergic people, but beware of possible mold growth in the humidifier.