

Allergies

Description

Allergies affect 20 to 25 percent of the population, with an increased incidence among persons having a family history of allergies. Most people with allergies are sensitive to airborne pollen of wind-pollinating plants (trees, grasses and weeds). Pollens are seasonal and increase in the air with warm dry winds. Dust, molds and animal dander (skin flakes) are other common allergens. Foods are less common causes of typical respiratory allergies.

Symptoms

Symptoms of allergies usually appear in the eyes, nose and sinuses, producing itching, tearing, congestion, sneezing, and excess mucous production. In some instances, the chest and respiratory tract are involved, with symptoms of wheezing, coughing and chest tightness, often aggravated by exertion or colds. Skin allergies are manifested by itchy red or scaly patches, often in skin fold areas (behind the knees, inside the elbows, or on the wrists). Hives, pale itchy, swollen areas on the skin surface, commonly surrounded by an area of redness, can be allergic in nature, particularly in reaction to foods or medications. Generally, hives are a response to a nerve and/or blood vessel disruption in the skin, usually aggravated by stress, overheating or exertion, and do not relate to a specific allergen.

Treatment

Treatment of allergies includes avoiding common or known allergens, if possible and the use of medications. Antihistamines and/or decongestants may be used to relieve nasal and eye symptoms of allergies, and bronchodilators are helpful for asthma. "For any allergic condition, a good fluid intake (water) is important. People with nasal allergies must avoid the repeated use of nose drops or sprays since the continued use of such preparations actually increases nasal discharge.

When allergy symptoms are persistent or unresponsive to the above measures, allergy skin testing can be done to determine specific allergens. The individual can then be immunized with appropriate desensitizing vaccines to unavoidable allergens (e.g., pollens, molds, dust). This type of immunotherapy regimen is a prolonged process, requiring regular injections; therefore not all persons are acceptable candidates.

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