



## Children's Allergies

An estimated 40 million to 45 million Americans (15 percent to 20 percent of the U.S. population) have some type of allergy and, in most people, these allergies first appear during infancy or childhood. It is not surprising then, that allergic disorders rank first among children's chronic diseases.

Any child may become allergic, but children from families with a history of allergy are more likely to be allergic. Children may inherit the tendency to become allergic from their parents, but only some of them will develop active allergic disease. Allergies can show up in different ways in children. Some children get skin rashes (atopic dermatitis) from allergy, some develop asthma, and some get hay fever.

Hay fever, also known as allergic rhinitis, is the most common of all allergy problems. It is characterized by a runny, itchy nose; sneezing; postnasal drip; and nasal congestion. The child with allergies may also have itchy, watery red eyes and chronic ear problems. Despite its common name, "hay fever," these allergy problems can occur at any time of the year ... seasonally or year-round.

The following are just a few points on potential problems for children with allergic rhinitis. Early identification of allergic problems in your child will improve their quality of life, decrease missed school days, and keep you at work.

### Nasal Congestion

Allergies are the most common cause of chronic nasal congestion in children. Sometimes a child's nose is congested (obstructed) to the point that he or she breathes through the mouth, especially while sleeping.

If the congestion is left untreated, this mouth breathing forces air currents through the mouth. The force of the air then changes the way the soft bones of the face grow. The face may actually become abnormally elongated in a pattern called "adenoidal face." This causes the teeth to come in at an improper angle, as well as creating an overbite. Braces or other dental treatments may be necessary to correct these problems. Early treatment of the allergies causing the nasal congestion may prevent these problems.

### Allergy and Ear Infections

Allergies lead to inflammation in the ear and may cause fluid accumulation that can promote ear infections and decreased hearing. If this happens when the child is learning to talk, poor speech development may result. Clinically, allergies can cause earaches, as well as ear itching, popping and fullness ("stopped up ears"). Anyone with these symptoms should be considered for testing and treatment.



## Allergies at School

Fall means going back to school. For allergic children, that may mean absences due to problems related to hay fever. The following are some of the problems to look for so that allergy can be properly diagnosed and treated, as well as several suggestions for helping the allergic child.

- **Dust irritation.** Reducing dust in the home will be helpful to most allergic family members. At school, children with allergic problems should sit away from the blackboards to avoid irritation from chalk dust.
- **School pets.** Furry animals in school may cause problems for allergic children. If your child has more problems while at school, it could be the class pet.
- **Asthma and physical education.** Physical education and sports are a big part of the school day for many children. Having asthma does not mean eliminating these activities. Often medication administered by using an inhaler is prescribed before exercise to control their symptoms. Children with asthma and other allergic diseases should be able to participate in any sport the child chooses - provided the doctor's advice is followed.
- **Dry air.** With the onset of cold weather, using a humidifier to accompany forced air heating systems may be helpful in some regions of the country. Adding a small amount of moisture to dry air makes breathing easier for most people. However, care should be taken not to allow the humidity above 40 percent, which promotes the growth of dust mites and mold.
- **Change in behavior.** Since children cannot always express their annoying or painful symptoms, they may exhibit behavior problems in school and at home. Be on the alert for possible allergies if your child has bouts of irritability, temper tantrums or decreased ability to concentrate in school. These are all signs of "allergic irritability syndrome" often caused by nose, ear and sinus symptoms in allergic children. Sometimes allergic children manifest overactive behavior, and usually, their schoolwork suffers. This should NOT imply that attention deficit disorder is caused by allergies! When a child's allergies are properly treated, his or her symptoms, behavior and school performance can improve.

## Food Allergic Infants

The best food for a newborn is mother's milk. However, some especially sensitive babies can have allergic reactions to foods their mothers eat. Babies can be tested for allergies. Eliminating these foods from the mother's diet may provide relief for the child, but some babies will be allergic regardless of what their mothers do. When this occurs, your physician may recommend a hypoallergenic infant formula.

As infants grow, their nutritional needs continue to change, and your physician will advise when it is time for solid foods. It is best to start with foods that generally do not cause allergic reactions in adults - carrots, pears, potatoes and rice, for example. Foods that should be avoided early on include wheat, eggs, corn products, citrus fruits and nut butters.

Solid foods should be introduced one at a time in small quantities - a teaspoonful, for example.



After three to four days, if the child is adjusting well to the new food item, another may be introduced. As the child becomes accustomed to a variety of foods that do not traditionally cause allergic reactions, foods from the second list above may be introduced in small quantities as well, one at a time. This progressive introduction of food items allows parents to better monitor potential allergic reactions to specific kinds of foods.

Cow's milk is another food that frequently causes allergies in children, but it is a nutritionally important part of a child's diet. Milk should be eliminated from a child's diet only if you are sure the child is allergic to it. Parents may suspect allergy if the child exhibits respiratory problems or rash. If you suspect your child may be allergic to dairy products, consult your physician. Your physician may conduct appropriate tests to verify that allergies exist, determine the allergens responsible, and prescribe the proper course of treatment once the diagnosis is confirmed.

### **Just Remember**

- Allergies are common in children.
- Many childhood problems are made worse by allergies.
- While most allergic problems are not life-threatening, treatment of your child's allergies will make them happier and healthier.