

Understanding Allergies and Allergy Testing

◆What are allergies?

Millions of Americans have allergies, an unusual sensitivity to substances that are normally harmless. If you have allergies and come into contact with a substance to which you are sensitive, your **immune system**, which protects your body, overreacts and treats the substance as an intruder. As a result, **antibodies** are produced to fight the substance. Those antibodies attach themselves to **mast cells** in the respiratory system and elsewhere in the body. **Histamine** is ultimately released to neutralize the substance to which you are sensitive. Unfortunately, histamine can also irritate your nose, eyes, and throat – resulting in allergy symptoms.

◆What are the symptoms of allergies?

The **symptoms** that we most often associate with allergies are **sneezing, runny nose, nasal congestion, watery and itchy eyes, and a scratchy throat**. However, headaches, insomnia, coughing, and wheezing may also occur. You can have all of these symptoms together or only one or two symptoms and still have allergies.

◆What could I be allergic to?

Allergies are caused by harmless substances that your body treats as intruders. These substances are called **allergens**. Indoor allergens tend to be **perennial**, which means they occur year-round. House dust, molds, feathers, and pet dander are all examples of perennial allergens.

In contrast, outdoor allergens tend to be **seasonal**, which means they occur at certain times of the year. Wind-borne plant pollen is usually the cause of seasonal allergies, often called **hay fever**. Seasonal allergens include tree pollen in the spring, grass pollen in the summer, and weed pollen, such as ragweed in the fall.

Other substances, called **irritants**, can trigger an allergic reaction even though they are not actually allergens. Cigarette smoke, paint fumes, air pollution, aerosol sprays, and scented cleaning products are common irritants.

You can have allergies that are only seasonal, only perennial, or both. Irritants can trigger an allergic reaction regardless of the type of allergy you have.

◆How might my allergies be treated?

Many different allergy medications are now available to choose from, including antihistamines, decongestants, nasal steroids, and allergy shots. Your doctor can determine what kind of treatment is best for relieving your particular allergy symptoms. And remember, whatever medication your doctor decides on for you, be sure to take it as directed.

◆Is there anything else I can do to feel better?

Minimizing contact with the allergens you are sensitive to can really help you minimize your symptoms. In this respect, you can play a major role in allergy control. **Here are some tips:**

- ❖ **Keep windows closed** especially when you sleep. Use air-conditioning to keep the air allergen-free. You might also want to cleanse the air further with a HEPA air cleaner, particularly in the bedroom.
- ❖ **Save outdoor activities for the afternoon or evening**, when pollen levels are lower. Try to stay inside when winds are gusty, which can stir up pollen. Also, avoid exercising near grassy fields, busy intersections, or highways.
- ❖ **Clean the house often and thoroughly**, and remove knickknacks and clutter, which collect dust. Also, remove carpeting, encase pillows and mattresses in dustproof covers, and cover windows with blinds and shades instead of curtains.
- ❖ **Keep humidity low** in the house year-round to lower levels of molds and house dust. Be sure to fix any water or drainage problems in the basement, and replace heating and ventilation filters monthly.
- ❖ **Try to avoid contact with pets** if you are allergic to fur or dander; also keep pets out of the bedroom. Bathe pets at least once a month to reduce dander.
- ❖ **Avoid irritants** such as tobacco smoke, paint fumes, air pollution, aerosol sprays, and scented cleaning products, which can set off an allergy attack.

◆How can I tell if I have allergies?

Because the symptoms associated with allergies can be caused by other conditions, your doctor is the only one who can determine whether you actually have allergies. Your doctor will first ask you many questions about your symptoms and medical history. Your family history is important because allergies tend to be hereditary.

To confirm your diagnosis, your doctor may take a blood sample from you and send it to the laboratory for blood testing. That is where Sonora Quest Laboratories comes in, with the broadest range of allergy tests available today. Sonora Quest Laboratories can determine whether you actually do have allergies, how allergic you are, and what allergens to which you are sensitive. All in all, blood testing can give your complete "allergy profile".

Your doctor may also refer you to an allergist for skin testing. In skin testing, a drop of liquid containing a suspected allergen is placed on the back or forearm, and the skin underneath is pricked with a needle. If redness with swelling develops, you may be allergic to the tested substance. Sometimes, these results are not conclusive if you are on certain medications or have recently taken an antihistamine. In these cases, blood testing is more reliable.

