Diagnose, avoid, treat: how to manage allergies

Knowing the triggers is a big part of managing allergies successfully.

Researchers have yet to understand why our immune systems mistakenly attack harmless substances in our bodies, causing miserable allergic reactions. But hopefully it's a mystery that will be solved in the near future.

In the meantime, there are tests to help identify allergies. There are medications to minimise the misery of allergic reactions. And there are practical prevention tips for avoiding the allergens that trigger an allergic response.

Find out what kind of allergies you have

If you have some allergy symptoms, but aren't sure what the trigger is, see your healthcare provider. Try to keep a record of when you feel any type of recurring symptom that suggests a chronic allergy. There are tests that a healthcare provider may suggest, but your health history and a physical may go a long way to identifying the likely source of your allergies.

Avoid allergens: make a checklist

Once you know what triggers your allergic reaction, you can take steps to avoid those triggers. Over the page is a sample checklist. We suggest that you create your own checklist and share it with anyone at home or work who can be a source of support. If you pick up a new tip, add it to your checklist.

Your checklist for avoiding nasal allergy triggers

- [ ] Wear sunglasses and a hat to reduce pollen getting into your eyes
- [ ] Wear a dust mask for outdoor chores
- [ ] Shower and change when you get home (and wash your hair before you go to sleep)
- [ ] If you have seasonal allergies, check the pollen count and avoid outdoor activities when the count is high (or avoid the time of day when the pollen count is high and when it's windy)
- [ ] If you walk with co-workers, suggest an indoor alternative for days when the pollen count is high (your alternative walking venue will come in handy when the weather is bad, too!)

Your checklist for avoiding food allergy triggers

- [ ] Make sure your supervisor and colleagues know about your food allergy
- [ ] Bring your own food and label it if you use a shared refrigerator
- [ ] Avoid cross-contamination with other foods (for example, bring your own utensils to work)
- [ ] Make sure that food preparation areas and equipment are free from common allergens, such as peanuts. This safety practice should be posted prominently; if this is not the case, warnings should be posted
- [ ] Check ingredient lists; if all of the ingredients aren't listed, don't eat the food
- [ ] If you're dining out with co-workers, suggest a restaurant where you know you can get a safe meal

Medications and treatments

There are many different types of medications and treatment options for allergies. Your doctor may recommend antihistamines, decongestants, or nasal corticosteroids. If you have food allergies, your healthcare provider may prescribe an epinephrine auto-injector.

There are other medications that your healthcare provider may recommend, depending on the type of allergy, how much relief you're getting from medications you may already be taking, and other considerations. Always consult your healthcare provider before taking medication for allergies. If you have a prescription medication, make sure you understand how to use the medication properly before or after exposure to an allergen.

Plan ahead for emergencies

No matter how careful you are, you may still be exposed to an allergen. As we've discussed in this campaign, you can't predict how your body will react to that allergen based on past experiences. The smartest and safest thing to do is to always be prepared for a severe allergic reaction.

Steps to take:

1. If you have an epinephrine auto-injector, always keep it with you. Check it periodically to make sure it hasn't expired or been damaged. Follow directions on how to store the medication correctly.

2. Fill out an emergency plan, working with your healthcare provider and your supervisor.

3. Share your plan with co-workers, in case you have an allergic reaction in a meeting or while traveling.

4. Wear or carry medical identification.

Remember, even if you don't suffer from allergies, a co-worker might. The more you understand and are considerate of all types of allergies, the more you can improve health and safety for yourself and those around you.

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