Is your common cold actually a chronic allergy?

What on earth — or in the air — is making you sneeze?

There is still so much that the medical community doesn't understand about allergies. Why does your body attack a harmless substance, like dust, as though it was a deadly strain of flu? Why can your co-workers take a walk on a beautiful spring day, but you come back coughing and sneezing?

And why is it so important to know whether you're coughing and sneezing from a cold or an allergy? Why does it matter?

First, while someone with a cold can infect you, someone with a nasal allergy (also known as allergic rhinitis) cannot. So if you have nasal allergies, you don't have to avoid shaking hands with a co-worker. You can't catch or transmit an allergy.

Because allergies usually come back again and again, you can become very self-conscious about symptoms that you feel are annoying to others: sniffling, throat clearing, wheezing.

You may feel isolated because you have to skip outdoor activities with co-workers on high pollen days. Whatever you experienced in the past is not a predictor of the future. Sometimes allergic reactions can be mild, but at other times they might be severe.

While you can't cure an allergy, you may be able to manage the symptoms if you reduce or eliminate exposure to the offending allergen.

Use the chart below to help you rule out colds. If the symptoms that remain make allergies likely, it's important to be your own detective. Record your symptoms and see if you can connect them to any environmental conditions outside or in the office. You may also be allergic to more than one substance, so be patient and detailed when you keep records. When you meet with your healthcare provider, this kind of history may be extremely valuable in helping to determine what substances are triggering an allergic response.

Colds

- You can catch a cold from contact with someone else (communicable)
- Your symptoms last until the virus runs its course
- It takes about three days from infection to when you have symptoms
- Can produce thick, yellow mucus
- Can be accompanied by fever and body aches
- You never know when or where you might be exposed to the germs that will cause a cold
- Catching one cold doesn't mean you'll catch a cold every time there are cold germs around you

Nasal Allergies

- You can't catch a nasal allergy from someone else with allergies (noncommunicable)
- Your symptoms will last as long as you're exposed to the allergen
- An allergic response will start as soon as you're in contact with the allergen
- Can produce clear mucus
- Allergy systems don't include fever and body aches
- Symptoms return at the same time each year
- Once you have an allergic reaction to an allergen, it's likely you'll always have a reaction to the same allergen, although the symptoms and severity may change

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