

ALLERGY

An “allergy” is an abnormal reaction due to increased sensitivity to foreign substances called “allergens” which are harmless to others. The allergic reaction is essentially an overreaction of one branch of the immune system which normally protects against infection.

An “allergen” may be inhaled, swallowed, touched or injected. Common allergens include pollens (grasses, trees, weeds), molds, house dust, dust mites, animal saliva and dander (the skin which is shed even by animals which do not shed hair), foods, medication, chemicals, insect venoms, feathers and other household substances.

When the “allergens” enter the body, they react with cells called mast cells which contain lots of potent chemicals into the tissues causes swelling, increased secretions, and tightening of the muscles in the area of the reaction. The symptoms of the allergy depend on the sensitivity of the individual, the amount of allergen exposure, and the location of the allergic reaction in the body. The same substance may cause itchy, red eyes, sneezing, congestion and a runny nose; hives; coughing, wheezing, shortness of breath; or abdominal pain and diarrhea.

The symptoms may be entirely seasonal if caused by certain pollens (trees and grasses in the spring; weeds in the late summer and early fall in this area.) They may be year around if caused by an animal, dust mites or mold to which one is constantly exposed. Indoor dust and mold exposure is generally greater during the colder months, when heat is on, and outdoor mold exposure is often greater in spring and much greater in fall.

While an allergy cannot be cured, it can be controlled. There are three general approaches to the treatment of allergy:

1. **AVOIDANCE** of the offending substance and nonspecific irritants known to worsen most respiratory or skin conditions. This is particularly important with allergy to foods and pets. Smoke is an irritant which must always be avoided.
2. **MEDICATION** to control or prevent symptoms used either regularly or as needed when symptoms occur.
3. **IMMUNOTHERAPY** (“allergy shots”) to decrease an individual’s sensitivity to unavoidable allergens.