

# Allergies

BIRTH DEFECT RESEARCH FOR CHILDREN



## What are Allergies?

Allergy means “altered reactivity” or sensitivity to usually non-toxic substances like pollens, grasses, mold, pets and/or foods. Allergic symptoms can range from mild reactions like rashes, stuffy nose and sneezing to severe asthma and anaphylactic shock, a life threatening allergic reaction.



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## How Many People Have Allergies?

It is estimated that 35 million people in the United States suffer from allergies.

## How Do You Know If Your Child Has Allergies?

Some symptoms of allergy like itchy eyes, hives and sneezing can be easy to identify. Many times these allergic reactions can be traced to certain seasons of the year or locations (like outside versus inside the house). Other allergic symptoms are more difficult to recognize. Allergic reactions to food can release allergens into the digestive tract causing chronic nasal congestion, breathing difficulties, skin rashes and sometimes even symptoms like headache, depression and hyperactivity. One early sign of food allergy may be infant colic or eczema, a skin condition.

## How Can You Help An Allergic Child?

**Medical Diagnosis and Treatment:** There are several different medical specialties which may be able to diagnose and treat childhood allergies.

**Allergist/Immunologist:** A traditional allergist will usually test your child using skin scratch and patch tests or a blood test called RAST. Your child's reaction to these tests will help your allergist determine what your child is allergic to and how to best treat the allergies. This type of allergy testing is most accurate in detecting allergies to pollen, trees, grasses and pets. Traditional allergy treatments include the use of drugs like antihistamines, allergy desensitization shots (immunotherapy) and avoiding certain allergens.

**Otolaryngologists (ENTs):** ENTs are doctors who specialize in treating ear, nose and throat problems. Many ENTs use the same type of allergy testing as the traditional allergists. Others use a different technique called provocation-neutralization therapy. In this type of testing small amounts of a suspected allergen are injected under the skin. If there is an allergy, a red swelling called a hive will form. The doctor then injects more diluted amounts of the same substances until no hives form. This amount of the allergen is used for

injections which are supposed to block symptoms when your child is exposed to the allergic substances.

**Clinical Ecologist:** Some doctors who practice this type of environmental medicine also use the provocation-neutralization method of testing and treatment. Others use a similar method called sublingual testing in which drops of the suspected allergens are put under the child's tongue for 10 minutes. If the symptoms are reported, smaller amounts of the same allergen are given until the reaction is blocked. Treatment drops are formulated from these neutralizing doses. Clinical ecologists also recommend the use of rotary diets for food allergies. In this type of diet, food groups are rotated every five days to decrease the child's exposure to low-level allergens.

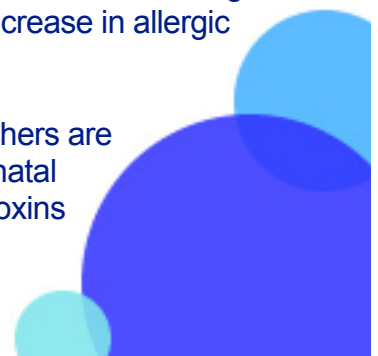
## What Causes Allergies?

**Genetic Predisposition:** The predisposition to allergies is believed to be inherited, but not all family members will be allergic to the same substance.

**Exposure to Toxic Substances:** Exposure to certain toxic chemicals can result in an increase in allergies to both natural and artificial chemical substances. This condition is called Environmental Illness (EI) or Multiple Chemical Sensitivity (MCS). Symptoms of EI can be triggered by exposures to small amounts of industrial and household chemicals, cigarette smoke, pesticides, food additives and alcoholic beverages. EI can involve symptoms in multiple organ systems - neurological (nervous system), endocrine (hormonal), genitourinary and immunological (infection fighting system).

**Viral:** Chronic infections can cause immunological dysfunction resulting in an increase in allergic responses.

**Prenatal Exposure:** Researchers are studying the effects that prenatal exposure to environmental toxins may have on the developing immune system. There is some evidence that certain



# Allergies



exposures may cause children to be born with impaired immune systems resulting in an increase in allergies and infections.

## How Can You Help Your Allergic Child?

**Keep a diary:** Before you take your child to a physician for allergy testing, keep a diary of symptoms and possible exposure to foods, air-borne substances like pollen and mold and household chemicals. This will help the doctor diagnose your child's allergies more quickly and accurately.

**Visit Your Library:** Your public library has many good books describing the various methods diagnosing and treating the allergies.

**Clean and Clear:** One way to reduce your child's "allergic load" is to keep his/her room as clean as possible. This means avoiding clutter, nappy rugs, furry stuffed animals and pets in the bedroom.

**Diet:** Allergic children benefit from a healthy diet which offers a wide variety of fresh, unprocessed foods. Rotating food groups can help eliminate low-level allergies to commonly eaten food groups. (Note: Some children have serious allergic reactions to certain foods like peanuts and should avoid these foods at all times.)

**Medication:** Antihistamines may be prescribed by your doctor to relieve some of your child's allergy symptoms. Allergy shots may help your child overcome some types of allergies. Other medications may be used to improve your child's overall immune function.

## Can Allergies Be Prevented?

Some allergy symptoms may change as a child grows older. A child with a predisposition for allergies, however, may develop new allergies at any time during life.

Fact Sheet by:

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