
PEDIATRIC ALLERGY TREATMENT: WHAT TO WATCH FOR AND HOW TO HELP YOUR CHILD

Allergies in children are often caused by an abnormal immune system reaction to harmless things in the environment, such as food, dust particles, pollen, animals, or medications. Allergies can also run in the family and be passed down from parents to their children.

The ears, nose, and throat are organs that can be highly reactive to certain allergies. Particles in the air can cause sneezing, itchy eyes, ears, and nose, ear pressure, swelling of the face, tickling in the throat, and coughing. Eyes can become dry and red, and the nose can be runny. Kids can even get bruising under their eyes from allergies, or a crease on their noses just from rubbing an itchy nose too often.

The most important way to identify possible allergies is to watch your child's reaction to foods and different environmental settings. Food allergies can cause stomach aches, vomiting, and diarrhea, and may indicate a serious reaction to something your child ate or drank. Paying special attention to foods like peanuts, milk, eggs, wheat, and shellfish can help narrow down what your child might be allergic to.

Environmental and seasonal allergies may be bothersome, but they rarely cause serious issues. Outside, things like pollen, plants, and insect bites can cause a serious reaction. Inside, things like molds, dust mites, and exposure to animal fur/hair can also cause allergic issues.

The most concerning symptom of an allergic reaction is called "anaphylaxis," when the air passages swell and close. This reaction can be life-threatening, and can happen quickly, or it might happen hours after being exposed. Anaphylaxis is usually treated with an injection of adrenalin (Epi-Pen), and parents often take their child to the emergency room for treatment and close monitoring.

WHAT SHOULD I DO IF MY CHILD HAS ALLERGIES?

The most important way to identify possible allergies is to watch your child's reaction to foods and different environmental settings, but some allergies can be less obvious to identify. Allergic symptoms such as a stuffy nose and sneezing can also resemble a common cold or sinus infection. Kids with allergies may be more prone to getting multiple ear infections or nose and throat infections. The good news is that helping control the allergies can often lead to less infections and illness.

Discussing your child's symptoms, when they occur, and how severe they have been with your primary care physician or ENT (ear, nose, and throat) specialist, or otolaryngologist, is the most important way to determine what may be making your child sick. Common tests are performed to diagnose exactly what your child is allergic to, and how significant the allergy is. Skin tests can be done easily in the office with minimal discomfort. In some cases, blood tests can be ordered.

Even though there is no cure for allergies, the symptoms can be managed to improve the quality of your child's life and decrease suffering. The best first step is to avoid allergic triggers and let everyone—family members, teachers, parents of your child's friends—know that your child has a certain reaction. At the grocery store or restaurants, be aware of cross-contamination of foods that may not directly contain something your child is allergic to, but were cooked with them or near them.

Using special air filters, linens, pest control methods, hot water in the washing machine, and changing the way your child interacts with family pets can also help decrease their allergic symptoms.

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Daily allergy medications are easy to use and usually do not cause side effects for the rest of the body. Your primary care physician or ENT specialist might start your child on a nasal spray, eyedrops, or an antihistamine pill. Most antihistamines given to children do not cause drowsiness. For children with multiple allergies and bad reactions to allergic triggers, allergy shots or sublingual (under the tongue) drops might be helpful for long-term control.

HOW SHOULD I PREPARE FOR A DOCTOR'S APPOINTMENT?

Before you visit your doctor, write down what allergic symptoms your child has had, and try to pay attention to what may have caused or triggered them. Also, be aware if other family members have allergies, asthma, sinus infections, or reactions to certain foods; that can help identify what might be happening with your child.

Some questions you might want to consider include:

1. How will you decide if my child has allergies? What is the most simple, painless way to make an accurate diagnosis?
2. Do you recommend medications to treat my child's symptoms? If so, which one(s)?
3. Does my child need to see a lung or allergy specialist?
4. How do I be prepared for an anaphylactic reaction, and what should I do if my child has life-threatening breathing issues due to allergies?