

Allergies



Overview

You have an allergy when your body believes that something harmless, such as peanuts or pollen, can hurt you. Your immune system overreacts. This can cause uncomfortable or even dangerous symptoms.

Causes

The cause of allergies is not fully understood. The genes you inherit can make you more likely to develop allergies. Allergies may also be linked to your overall health and to the types of things you are exposed to in your environment. You may come into contact with a harmless substance many times, but at some point your immune system decides that it may be harmful. When this happens, your white blood cells produce antibodies. These are special cells designed to fight the substance. The next time you are exposed to it, your immune system attacks. You are now allergic to the substance.

Common Allergens

A substance that causes an allergic response is called an "allergen." Common allergens include pollen, animal dander, dust mites and mold. Insect stings cause an allergic response for many people. So do foods such as peanuts, wheat and shellfish. Some people are allergic to medications, and some are allergic to latex.

Symptoms

Symptoms of an allergic response can vary from person to person. Symptoms also depend on the allergen. For example, allergens you inhale may cause hay fever, while food allergies may cause tingling and swelling of the lips, mouth and throat. The most severe allergic reaction is called "anaphylaxis." This can cause your body to go into shock. You may lose consciousness. This can be fatal.

Treatment

Treatment options for allergies depend on your particular needs. If your symptoms are mild, you may benefit from over-the-counter medicines. If your allergies are severe, you may need immediate medical care. Your healthcare provider can create a care plan that is right for your needs.