

EAR, NOSE AND THROAT ASSOCIATES OF CHESTER COUNTY

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ALLERGY

Allergy is a term used to describe an abnormal response of the immune system when exposed to a certain substance; this substance is called an *allergen*. Some examples of allergens are dust mites, animal dander, molds, pollens, foods and stinging insects. Two out of every 10 Americans are plagued by allergies in some form. When the body is exposed to an allergen, this allergen binds to our allergy antibody, called IgE, to form an antigen-IgE complex. These antibodies then attach to a special subset of blood cells called mast cells. This binding of mast cells causes a cascade of chemicals to be released into the body; namely histamine, leukotrienes, and eosinophils. This release of chemicals results in our allergy symptoms.

Inhalants (dust mites, animal dander, molds, and pollens), result in symptoms like itchy eyes and nose, watery eyes, sneezing, congestion, runny nose, headaches, post-nasal drip, cough, and sore throats. Certain foods can cause allergy reactions, causing symptoms like hives, rashes, eczema, gastrointestinal problems, tongue swelling, and even difficulty breathing and anaphylaxis. Common foods associated with allergic reactions are peanut, milk, soy, wheat, and a few others. Stinging insects like bees, wasps, hornets and yellow jackets cause allergic reactions for people. These reactions often result in anaphylaxis (a potentially life-threatening allergic reaction).

Allergies can manifest in many ways, such as the symptoms mentioned earlier, and can negatively affect the quality of your life, and performance at school and/or work. Allergies can also result in other medical problems, such as chronic sinusitis, nasal polyps, otitis media, eczema, and asthma.

If you have problems with allergies, whether it is inhalants, foods and/or stinging insects, you can be tested for the type of allergies you have, and also the extent and severity of them. Testing can be done either as a blood test, or by skin testing. If you are indeed allergic, treatment with one or more medicines can help you; examples of medicines are nasal steroid sprays, nasal antihistamine sprays, oral antihistamines, leukotriene modifiers, oral steroids, topical eye drops, topical creams, and inhalers.

There is another form of treatment called immunotherapy. Immunotherapy is a way of desensitizing your body against these allergens, and can be done for both inhalants and stinging insects. For foods, treatment includes avoidance and we can work with you to help modify your diet. Immunotherapy involves either allergy shots or sublingual therapy. Allergy shots are highly effective, but need to be done at a physician's office, due to the risk of anaphylaxis. Sublingual therapy is similar to allergy shots, but the allergens are dropped under the tongue, rather than injected. Sublingual has been shown to be as effective as allergy shots, but has a

better safety profile. The risk of anaphylaxis is zero, and therefore a patient can do these drops at home, thus making it more convenient.

In conclusion, allergies affect us in a variety of ways, and can interfere with our quality of life and result in other medical problems. If you suffer from allergies, make an appointment with one of our ENTACC health care providers to discuss your symptoms. He/She will evaluate you, and make arrangements for testing, and help you determine the best course of treatment for you.