

Food Allergies

Causes: While any food can cause an adverse reaction, eight types of food account for about 90 percent of all reactions:

- Eggs
- Milk
- Peanuts
- Tree nuts
- Fish
- Shellfish
- Wheat
- Soy

Symptoms: Symptoms of an allergic reaction may involve the skin, the gastrointestinal tract, the cardiovascular system and the respiratory tract. They can surface in one or more of the following ways:

- Vomiting and/or stomach cramps
- Hives
- Shortness of breath
- Wheezing
- Repetitive cough
- Shock or circulatory collapse
- Tight, hoarse throat; trouble swallowing
- Swelling of the tongue, affecting the ability to talk or breathe
- Weak pulse
- Pale or blue coloring of skin
- Dizziness or feeling faint
- Anaphylaxis, a potentially life-threatening reaction that can impair breathing and send the body into shock; reactions may simultaneously affect different parts of the body (for example, a stomachache accompanied by a rash)

Diagnosing: After taking your history, your allergist may order skin tests and/or blood tests, which indicate whether food-specific immunoglobulin E (IgE) antibodies are present in your body:

- Skin-prick tests provide results in about 20 minutes. A liquid containing a tiny amount of the food allergen is placed on the skin of your arm or back. Your skin is pricked with a small, sterile probe, allowing the liquid to seep under the skin. The test, which isn't painful but can be uncomfortable, is considered positive if a wheal (resembling the bump from a mosquito bite) develops at the site where the suspected allergen was placed.
- Blood tests, which are a bit less exact than skin tests, measure the amount of IgE antibody to the specific food(s) being tested. Results are typically available in about a week and are reported as a numerical value.

Skin Allergies

Overview: Bumps, itching, redness and other skin conditions are very common, and their cause may not be easily identifiable. Rashes can be caused by many things, including plants (poison ivy, for example), allergic reactions to a medication or a food, or an illness (measles or chickenpox, for example). Eczema and hives, both of which are related to allergies, are two of the most common skin rashes.

Atopic Dermatitis: Atopic dermatitis is the most common form of eczema, affecting between 10 and 20 percent of children and 1 to 3 percent of adults. A common symptom of atopic dermatitis is dry, red, irritated and itchy skin. Sometimes, especially when infected, the skin may have small, fluid-filled bumps that ooze a clear or yellowish liquid. People with atopic dermatitis often have a family history of allergies.

Hives: Hives (urticaria) are red bumps or welts that appear on the body. The condition is called acute urticaria if it lasts for no more than six weeks, and chronic urticaria if it persists beyond six weeks. Acute urticaria is most commonly caused by exposure to an allergen or by an infection. The cause of chronic urticaria is largely unknown.

Contact Dermatitis: Contact dermatitis is a reaction that appears when the skin comes in contact with an irritant or an allergen. Symptoms can include a rash, blisters, itching and burning.

Soaps, laundry detergents, fabric softeners, shampoos — or even excessive exposure to water — can all cause contact dermatitis. Other items that can cause a reaction are metals (such as nickel, a component of stainless steel and other alloys used to make costume jewelry), adhesives, nail polish, topical medications, plants and latex gloves.

Sometimes an allergen won't cause a skin reaction unless the skin is also exposed to sunlight. This condition is called photoallergic contact dermatitis. It can occur with products such as shaving lotion, sunscreen and some perfumes.

Dust Allergies

Overview: Dust allergies also make it difficult to breathe and may trigger [asthma symptoms](#), such as wheezing, coughing, tightness in the chest and shortness of breath.

Dust also just makes some people itchy.

People with dust allergies often suffer the most inside their own homes or in other people's homes. Oddly enough, their symptoms often worsen during or immediately after vacuuming, sweeping and dusting. The process of cleaning can stir up dust particles, making them easier to inhale.

Dust Allergy Symptoms:

- Sneezing
- Runny or stuffy nose
- Red, itchy or teary eyes
- Wheezing, coughing, tightness in the chest and shortness of breath
- Itching

Dust Allergy Triggers:

- Dust mites
- Cockroaches
- Mold
- Pollen
- Pet hair, fur or feathers

Dust Allergy Management:

- Opt for wood flooring over wall-to-wall carpets when possible, especially in bedrooms.
- Clean your house regularly, using a central vacuum or a vacuum with a HEPA filter. If you are allergic, wear an N95 filter mask while dusting, sweeping or vacuuming.
- Use "mite-proof" cases on your mattresses and pillows. Wash all bed linens regularly, using hot water.
- Keep a HEPA air cleaner running in the allergic person's bedroom.
- Keep pets out of the allergic person's bedroom at all times.
- Keep all unrefrigerated food covered; dispose of food waste in a tightly sealed garbage can.
- If cockroaches are a known problem, use roach traps and schedule regular visits by a professional pest control service.
- Install a high-efficiency media filter with a MERV rating of 11 or 12 in the furnace and the air conditioning unit. Leave the fan on to create a "whole house" air filter that removes particulates
- Get in the habit of using a hygrometer to measure the humidity in your home; keep the humidity level below 55 percent. If you live in a humid or sticky climate, you may find it helpful to use a dehumidifier.

Insect Sting Allergies

Overview: Insect stings typically result in pain, swelling and redness confined to the sting site. More severe reactions include symptoms appearing over a wider area (for example, swelling of your whole arm if you were stung on your wrist) or affecting other parts of the body from where the sting occurred.

Allergic reactions to stings can occur even after many normal reactions to stings and at any age. It has been estimated that potentially life-threatening allergic reactions to insect venom occur in 0.4 percent to 0.8 percent of children and 3 percent of adults. Thousands of people are stung by insects each year, and as many as 90–100 people in the United States die as a result of allergic reactions.

Symptoms of a Sting:

- Pain
- Redness
- Swelling (in area of sting and sometimes beyond)
- Flushing
- Hives
- Itching
- Anaphylaxis (less common), a potentially life-threatening reaction that impairs breathing and can cause the body to go into shock

Management & Treatment: Bees, wasps, hornets and yellow jackets are found throughout the United States and are most active during late summer and early fall. The red or black fire ant, found mainly in the southern United States, is a serious health hazard year-round. Avoidance of insect stings is the first line of defense. Here are some proven strategies:

- Don't walk barefoot in the grass, where stinging insects forage.
- Don't drink from open soft drink cans; stinging insects are attracted to them and may crawl inside.
- Keep food covered when eating outdoors.
- Don't use sweet-smelling perfume, hairspray or deodorant.
- Avoid wearing brightly colored clothing with flowery patterns.
- Wear long pants, long-sleeved shirts, socks, shoes and work gloves when working outdoors.
- Be cautious near bushes, eaves and attics, and avoid garbage containers and picnic areas.
- Have a professional exterminator remove known nests and inspect for other potential nesting areas.

Pet Allergies

Per Allergy Symptoms:

- Sneezing
- Runny or stuffy nose
- Facial pain (from nasal congestion)
- Coughing, chest tightness, shortness of breath and wheezing
- Watery, red or itchy eyes
- Skin rash or [hives](#)

Pet Allergy Treatments:

- Avoid being around dogs and cats; if you have a pet at home, take specific steps to limit exposure.
- Nasal sprays, antihistamines and bronchodilators can help relieve symptoms.
- Consider [allergy shots](#) (immunotherapy).

Pet Allergy Management:

- Keep the pet out of your bedroom and restrict it to only a few rooms. Be advised that keeping the cat in only one room will not limit the allergens to that room.
- Don't pet, hug or kiss the pet; if you do, wash your hands with soap and water.
- High-efficiency particulate air (HEPA) cleaners run continuously in a bedroom or living room can reduce allergen levels over time.
- Regular use of a high-efficiency vacuum cleaner or a central vacuum can reduce allergen levels.
- Giving your pet a bath at least once a week can reduce airborne pet allergens.

Drug Allergies

Overview: People with drug allergies may experience symptoms regardless of whether their medicine comes in liquid, pill or injectable form.

Drug Allergy Symptoms: While you may not experience allergic symptoms the first time you take a drug, your body could be producing antibodies to it. As a result, the next time you take the drug, your immune system may see it as an invader, and you'll develop symptoms as your body releases chemicals to defend against it.

These symptoms may include:

- Skin rash or [hives](#)
- Itching
- Wheezing or other breathing problems
- Swelling
- Vomiting
- Feeling dizzy or light-headed
- [Anaphylaxis](#), a potentially life-threatening reaction that can impair breathing and send the body into shock; reactions may simultaneously affect two or more organ systems (for example, when there is both a rash and difficulty breathing)

Penicillin causes most allergic drug symptoms. Just because you show allergic symptoms after taking penicillin doesn't mean that you will react to related drugs, such as amoxicillin, but it's more likely.

Antibiotics that contain sulfa drugs, such as Septra and Bactrim (sulfamethoxazole-trimethoprim) and Pediazole (erythromycin-sulfisoxazole), occasionally cause allergic reactions. Nonantibiotic drugs containing sulfa are very low-risk.

Anaphylaxis: Anaphylaxis is a severe, potentially life-threatening reaction that can simultaneously affect two or more organ systems (for instance, when there is both swelling and difficulty breathing, or vomiting and hives). If this occurs, call 911 and seek emergency medical care immediately.

If you are caring for someone who appears to be having a severe reaction to a drug, tell the emergency care team what drug was taken, when it was taken and what the dosage was.

If your allergic reaction to a drug is not life-threatening, your allergist may give you:

- An antihistamine to counteract the allergic reaction
- A nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drug, such as ibuprofen or aspirin, or a corticosteroid to reduce inflammation