

Your Employee Assistance Program is a support service that can help you take the first step toward change.

Understanding Allergies

Hives, runny nose, itchy eyes, eczema and asthma: these can all be signs and symptoms of an allergy. Defined as the abnormal reaction of the body's immune system to a substance (i.e. allergen), most allergies are not serious, but they are on the rise. While scientists can't agree on the cause of escalating allergy rates, research has offered up some interesting insights.

What are Common Triggers and Signs of Allergies?

Respiratory allergies like *hay fever* can be caused by a host of elements swirling around in the air—from grass, ragweed and other plant pollen, to animal dander, dust and mold. Symptoms include: coughing, sneezing, feeling congested and an itchy throat, nose and eyes. *Asthma*, a disease that affects the lungs and ability to breathe well, is also a very common childhood reaction to a number of different allergens.

Though **food allergies** are more common in young children, they can result in a range of reactions. While some people might suffer from mild diarrhea, cramping or nausea, others reactions, such as vomiting, swelling of the face and tongue, dizziness and trouble breathing, may signal a more severe allergy.

The **skin** can also react when the allergen either touches the skin or is ingested. *Hives*, which usually look like large red welts can show up gradually or appear instantly, and *angioedema*—a more profound swelling around the lips and eyes and sometimes hands and feet—can signal a serious allergic reaction to bee, wasp or other insect stings (another very common allergen), animal dander, food, medication and pollen amongst others. *Eczema*—a condition that causes extremely red, dry, itchy skin—can also be caused or worsened by exposure to an allergen.

While almost any drug has the potential to cause an allergic reaction, those antibiotics related to penicillin pose a higher risk. Insulin, local anesthetics and iodine are thought to be common drug sources of allergic responses.

Are Some Foods More Allergenic Than Others?

Though there is the potential for the body to react to almost any food, in North America nine food allergy troublemakers stand out from the pack: peanuts, tree nuts, milk, sesame seeds, egg, soy, seafood, wheat and sulphites (usually found in processed foods).

Can You Develop an Allergy as an Adult?

The short answer is yes—you can develop an allergy at any point in your life. If you notice signs of an allergic reaction, avoid the source if you're able to pinpoint the allergen. Allergies have sometimes been known to start off mildly, then, through continued exposure, develop into **anaphylaxis—**a rare but severe response that can cause a sudden drop in blood pressure and constrict the bronchial tubes, which can make it difficult to breath and, in rare cases, can result in death. If you think you may have suddenly developed an allergy, get a referral to see an allergy specialist from your doctor. The specialist will likely perform a simple test—where your skin is lightly pricked with a series of common allergens—to uncover the source of your reaction.

Someone I Know Has a Severe Allergy, What Should I Do?

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First off, it's important that you **take the allergy seriously**. Be considerate: if the person has a severe allergy to latex or food (common anaphylaxis-causing allergies), **avoid contact with the allergen** whenever the person is around. Read labels carefully to ensure you don't accidentally serve up a reaction and wash your hands thoroughly if you've recently come into contact with the allergen.

Ensure the person with the allergy carries **epinephrine**—a drug usually given via a needle, which can provide someone in anaphylactic shock with relief from the reaction (though he or she should still go to the hospital immediately). Because someone in anaphylactic shock may not have the ability to self-administer the shot, get a primer on how to give a dose of epinephrine from your doctor or pharmacist, in the event of an emergency.

Allergies can range from a minor annoyance to a potentially life-threatening concern. Avoid discomfort or an emergency by arming yourself with information, taking sensible precautions and mapping out an action plan for treatment in a crisis situation. Doing so can give you peace of mind and help you and those around you stay reaction-free.