

Allergies and Rhinitis:

Inflammation of the nasal mucous membrane leading to runny nose or post nasal drip is called rhinitis. The symptoms include sneezing, runny nose, and itching, caused by irritation and congestion in the nose. There are two types: allergic rhinitis and non-allergic rhinitis.

Allergic rhinitis occurs when the body's immune system over-responds to specific, non-infectious particles such as plant pollens, molds, dust mites, animal hair, industrial chemicals (including tobacco smoke), foods, medicines, and insect venom. This over-response causes skin redness and swollen membranes. When this occurs in the nose, sneezing and congestion are the result.

Allergies can be seasonal or year-round, depending on the causal agent. Seasonal allergies include hay fever, tree pollen, or mold spores. Year-around allergies are caused by pet hair, mold on wall paper, house plants, dust mites, and carpeting. Treatment is based on the timing of allergies

Non-allergic rhinitis symptoms can be triggered by cigarette smoke and other pollutants as well as strong odors, alcoholic beverages, and changes in temperature. Other causes may include blockages in the nose, a deviated septum, infections (in children), and over-use of medications such as decongestants.

Diagnosis of allergic rhinitis can be made in most people by clinical evaluation. Often, an ancillary blood test or skin allergy testing can help identify the specific agents one is allergic to.

Treatment of allergies is based on frequency and severity of symptoms. Symptoms to a mild degree that are minimally bothersome can be controlled with over-the-counter antihistamines and nasal/sinus rinses. When symptoms are more severe, evaluation and treatment by a physician are needed. Allergy treatment can be in the form of oral medications or nasal sprays. Classes of medications include anti-histamines, steroids, and anti-septics. A specific regimen can be determined after discussion with the physician.

Recent medical research has defined a relationship between allergies and sinus infections. If allergies are uncontrolled, they can be the cause of sinus infections. Uncontrolled allergies lead to inflammation of the lining of the nose, which can lead to blockage of the mucus outflow from the sinuses. This leads to an ideal environment for bacterial and/or fungal growth, and a sinus infection ensues.