

## General Allergic Reactions

An allergic reaction is a set of symptoms caused by an allergen. An allergen is something that causes a person's immune system to react. When a person comes in contact with an allergen, it causes the body to release chemicals. These include the chemical histamine. Histamine causes swelling and itching. It may affect the entire body. This is called a **general allergic reaction**. Often symptoms affect only 1 part of the body. This is called a **local allergic reaction**.

You are having an allergic reaction. Almost anything can cause one. Different people are allergic to different things. It is usually something that you ate or swallowed, came into contact with by getting or putting it on your skin or clothes, or something you breathed in the air. This can be very annoying and sometimes scary.

Most of us think of allergic reactions when we have a rash or itchy skin. Symptoms can include:

- Itching of the eyes, nose, and roof of the mouth
- Runny or stuffy nose
- Watery eyes
- Sneezing or coughing
- A blocked feeling in the ear
- Red, itchy rash called hives
- Red and purple spots
- Rash, redness, welts, blisters
- Itching, burning, stinging, pain
- Dry, flaky, cracking, scaly skin

Severe symptoms include:

- Swelling of the face, lips, or other parts of the body
- Hoarse voice
- Trouble swallowing, feeling like your throat is closing
- Trouble breathing, wheezing
- Nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, stomach cramps
- Feeling faint or lightheaded, rapid heart rate

Sometimes the cause may be obvious. But there are so many things that can cause a reaction that you may not be able to figure out. The most important things to help find your allergen are:

- Remembering when it started
- What you were doing at the time or just before that
- Any activities you were involved in
- Any new products or contacts

Below are some common causes. But remember that almost anything can cause a reaction. You may not even be aware that you came into contact with one of these things:

- Dust, mold, pollen
- Plants (common ones are poison ivy and poison oak, but there are many others)
- Animals
- Foods such as shrimp, shellfish, peanuts, milk products, gluten, and eggs. Also food colorings, flavorings, and additives.
- Insect bites or stings such as bees, mosquitos, fleas, ticks
- Medicines such as penicillin, sulfa medicines, amoxicillin, aspirin, and ibuprofen. But any medicine can cause a reaction.
- Jewelry such as nickel or gold. This can be new, or something you've worn for a while, including zippers and buttons.
- Latex such as in gloves, clothes, toys, balloons, or some tapes. Some people allergic to latex may also have problems with foods like bananas, avocados, kiwi, papaya, or chestnuts.
- Lotions, perfumes, cosmetics, soaps, shampoos, skincare products, nail products
- Chemicals or dyes in clothing, linen, cleaners, hair dyes, soaps, iodine

Many viruses and common colds can cause a rash that is not an allergic reaction. Sometimes it is hard to tell the difference between allergies, sensitivity, or an intolerance to something. This is especially true with food. Many things can cause diarrhea, vomiting, stomach cramps, and skin irritation.

## Home care



The goal of treatment is to help relieve the symptoms and get you feeling better. The rash will usually fade over several days. But it can sometimes last a couple of weeks. Over the next couple of days, there may be times when it gets a little worse, and then better again. Here are some things to do:

- If you know what you are allergic to, stay away from it. Future reactions could be worse than this one.
- Avoid tight clothing and anything that heats up your skin (hot showers or baths, direct sunlight). Heat will make itching worse.
- An ice pack will relieve local areas of intense itching and redness. To make an ice pack, put ice cubes in a plastic bag that seals at the top. Wrap it in a thin, clean towel. Don't put the ice directly on the skin because it can damage the skin.
- Oral diphenhydramine is an over-the-counter antihistamine sold at pharmacy and grocery stores. Unless a prescription antihistamine was given, diphenhydramine may be used to reduce itching if large areas of the skin are involved. It may make you sleepy. So be careful using it in the daytime or when going to school, working, or driving. **Note:** Don't use diphenhydramine if you have glaucoma or if you are a man with trouble urinating due to an enlarged prostate. There are other antihistamines that won't make you so sleepy. These are good choices for daytime use. Ask your pharmacist for suggestions.
- Don't use diphenhydramine cream on your skin. It can cause a further reaction in some people.
- To help prevent an infection, don't scratch the affected area. Scratching may worsen the reaction and damage your skin. It can also lead to an infection. Always check the affected for signs of an infection.
- Call your healthcare provider and ask what you can use to help decrease the itching.
- To decrease allergic reactions, try the following:
  - Use heat-steam to clean your home
  - Use high-efficiency particulate (HEPA) vacuums and filters

- Stay away from food and pet triggers
- Kill any cockroaches
- Clean your house often

### **Follow-up care**

Follow up with your healthcare provider, or as advised. If you had a severe reaction today, or if you have had several mild to medium allergic reactions in the past, ask your provider about allergy testing. This can help you find out what you are allergic to. If your reaction included dizziness, fainting, or trouble breathing or swallowing, ask your provider about carrying auto-injectable epinephrine.

### **Call 911**

Call 911 if any of these occur:

- Trouble breathing or swallowing, wheezing
- Cool, moist, pale skin
- Shortness of breath
- Hoarse voice or trouble speaking
- Confused
- Very drowsy or trouble awakening
- Fainting or loss of consciousness
- Rapid heart rate
- Feeling of dizziness or weakness or a sudden drop in blood pressure
- Feeling of doom
- Feeling lightheaded
- Severe nausea or vomiting, or diarrhea
- Seizure
- Swelling in the face, eyelids, lips, mouth, throat or tongue
- Drooling

### **When to seek medical advice**

Call your healthcare provider right away if any of these occur:

- Spreading areas of itching, redness or swelling
- Nausea or stomach cramps or abdominal pain
- Continuing or recurring symptoms

- Spreading areas of redness, swelling, or itching
- Signs of infection at the affected site:
  - Spreading redness
  - Increased pain or swelling
  - Fluid or colored drainage from the site
  - Fever of 100.4°F (38°C) or above lasting for 24 to 48 hours, or as directed by your provider

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