

Seasonal Allergies

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How do I know if I have seasonal allergies?

Seasonal allergies (also called “hay fever” or “seasonal allergic rhinitis”) happen when the body’s immune system over-responds to an allergen, typically pollen or mold, that is present for one season of the year. When pollen or mold spores are in the air, they are inhaled into the nose or lungs or land in the eyes. In people with allergies to pollen, the immune system mistakes the harmless pollen for something that is potentially harmful and responds by making large amounts of antibodies. These antibodies facilitate the release of histamine which opens the blood vessels and causes skin redness and swollen membranes. When this occurs in the nose, sneezing and congestion result. When it occurs in the eyes, itching, watering and redness occur. Other symptoms may include itching of the roof of the mouth or throat, dark circles under the eyes, fatigue, headaches or coughing caused by clear mucus running down the back of the throat. In persons with asthma, seasonal allergies may trigger asthma attacks.

Initially, it can be difficult to differentiate seasonal allergies from a common cold. However, a cold will usually end within seven to ten days while seasonal allergies will continue as long as the allergen is present in the environment. Additional differences in symptoms include:

Symptom	Allergic Rhinitis	Common Cold or Other Upper Respiratory Infection
Nasal Discharge	Thin, watery, clear	Thick, yellow to green in color
Fever	None	Occasionally, low-grade
Itching	In ears, nose and throat	Rare
Sneezing	Often occurring in violent, prolonged spells	Occasional
Duration	Weeks to months	7 to 10 days

In some people, allergic rhinitis can lead to sinusitis (bacterial infection of the sinuses). If you suffer from recurring bouts of allergic rhinitis, you should observe your symptoms on a continuous basis. If facial pain, a greenish-yellow nasal discharge, or a fever occurs, you may have sinusitis and you should see your physician.

Upcoming Email Topics

- Tips for Avoiding Allergy Triggers
- Allergy Medications

What can I do about my allergies?

Unfortunately, there is no cure for seasonal allergies. However, you can control your symptoms by avoiding your known allergens as much as possible and carefully choosing over-the-counter or prescription medications.

Identify Allergy Triggers

The first step to avoiding your known allergens is to know your allergy triggers. To identify an allergy to a specific type of pollen or mold spore requires consultation with your physician and testing. The main approach to confirm a suspected allergy is the skin sensitivity test in which the skin is scratched or pricked with extract of the various pollens. In sensitive people, the site will turn red, swollen and itchy. Blood test can also be performed, but take longer and are more expensive.

If you have mild to moderate seasonal allergies and wish to try to control your symptoms on your own, you may get a general idea of your allergy triggers by the season in which your allergies occur:

Season When Symptoms Occur	Likely Allergens	Characteristics of Likely Allergen
Spring (In New Jersey: Approximately March to June)	Tree Pollen	Large amounts of pollen distributed for miles.
Early Spring to First Frost	Outdoor Molds	Grow in moist shady areas and soil, decaying vegetation, compost piles, rotting wood and fallen leaves.
Summer (In New Jersey: Approximately June to November)	Grass and Weed Pollen	Regional as well as seasonal. Levels highest between 5 and 10 a.m. Levels lowest after heavy rain.
Late Summer and Fall (In New Jersey: Mid-August to Early October)	Ragweed	Causes 75% of all seasonal allergies. Levels highest between 5 and 10 a.m. in rural areas and 10 a.m. and 3 p.m. in urban areas. Levels highest on dry, hot and windy days.

Some people have symptoms of rhinitis no matter what the season. This is called perennial allergic rhinitis. It can be caused by indoor allergens such as animal dander, indoor mold, or dust mites. For more information on indoor allergens, please visit the website of the American Academy of Allergy, Asthma and Immunology at <http://www.aaaai.org/patients/publicedmat/tips/indoorallergens.stm> or the website of the Asthma and Allergy Foundation of America at <http://www.aafa.org/display.cfm?id=9&sub=18>. The Mayo Clinic also provides information on how to allergy proof your house at <http://www.mayoclinic.com/health/allergy/HQ01514>.

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Sources

American Academy of Allergy, Asthma and Immunology, American Academy of Otolaryngology, American Lung Association, Asthma and Allergy Foundation of America, National Institute of Health, National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences, National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, National Library of Medicine, Mayo Foundation for Medical Education and Research, University of Medicine and Dentistry New Jersey, and WebMD.