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Patient information: Allergic rhinitis (seasonal allergies) (Beyond the Basics)

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ALLERGIC RHINITIS OVERVIEW

Rhinitis refers to inflammation of the nasal passages. This inflammation can cause a variety of annoying symptoms, including sneezing, itching, nasal congestion, runny nose, and post-nasal drip (the sensation that mucus is draining from the sinuses down the back of the throat).

Brief episodes of rhinitis are usually caused by respiratory tract infections with viruses (eg, the common cold). Chronic rhinitis is usually caused by allergies, but it can also occur from overuse of certain drugs, some medical conditions, and other unidentifiable factors.

For many people, rhinitis is a lifelong condition that waxes and wanes over time. Fortunately, the symptoms of rhinitis can usually be controlled with a combination of environmental measures, medications, and immunotherapy (also called allergy shots).

Other forms of rhinitis are discussed separately. (See "[Patient information: Nonallergic rhinitis \(runny or stuffy nose\) \(Beyond the Basics\)](#)".)

WHO GETS ALLERGIC RHINITIS?

Allergic rhinitis, also known as hay fever, affects approximately 20 percent of people of all ages. The risk of developing allergic rhinitis is much higher in people with asthma or eczema and in people who have a family history of asthma or rhinitis.

Allergic rhinitis can begin at any age, although most people first develop symptoms in childhood or young adulthood. The symptoms are often at their worst in children and in people in their 30s and 40s. However, the severity of symptoms tends to vary throughout life; many people experience periods when they have no symptoms at all.

ALLERGIC RHINITIS CAUSES

Allergic rhinitis is caused by a nasal reaction to small airborne particles called allergens (substances that provoke an allergic reaction). In some people, these particles also cause reactions in the lungs (asthma) and eyes (allergic conjunctivitis).

The allergic reaction is characterized by activation of two types of inflammatory cells, called mast cells and basophils. These cells produce inflammatory substances, such as histamine, which cause fluid to build up in the nasal tissues (congestion), itching, sneezing, and runny nose. Over several hours, these substances activate other inflammatory cells that can cause persistent symptoms.

Seasonal versus perennial allergic rhinitis — Allergic rhinitis can be seasonal (occurring during specific seasons) or perennial (occurring year round). The allergens that most commonly cause **seasonal allergic rhinitis** include pollens from trees, grasses, and weeds, as well as spores from fungi and molds ([figure 1](#)).

The allergens that most commonly cause **perennial allergic rhinitis** are dust mites, cockroaches, animal dander, and fungi or molds. Perennial allergic rhinitis tends to be more difficult to treat.

ALLERGIC RHINITIS SYMPTOMS

The symptoms of allergic rhinitis vary from person to person. Although the term "rhinitis" refers only to the nasal symptoms, many patients also experience problems with their eyes, throat, and ears. In addition, sleep can be disrupted, so it is helpful to consider the entire spectrum of symptoms.

- **Nose:** watery nasal discharge, blocked nasal passages, sneezing, nasal itching, post-nasal drip, loss of taste, facial pressure or pain.
- **Eyes:** itchy, red eyes, feeling of grittiness in the eyes, swelling and blueness of the skin below the eyes (called allergic shiners). (See "[Patient information: Allergic conjunctivitis \(Beyond the Basics\)](#)".)
- **Throat and ears:** sore throat, hoarse voice, congestion or popping of the ears, itching of the throat or ears.
- **Sleep:** mouth breathing, frequent awakening, daytime fatigue, difficulty performing work.

When an allergen is present year round, the predominant symptoms include post-nasal drip, persistent nasal congestion, and poor-quality sleep.

ALLERGIC RHINITIS DIAGNOSIS

The diagnosis of allergic rhinitis is based upon a physical examination and the symptoms described above. Medical tests can confirm the diagnosis and identify the offending allergens.

Identify allergens and other triggers — It is often possible to identify the allergens and other triggers that provoke allergic rhinitis by:

- Recalling the factors that precede symptoms
- Noting the time at which symptoms begin
- Identifying potential allergens in a person's home, work, and school environments

Skin tests may be useful for people whose symptoms are not well controlled with medications or in whom the offending allergen is not obvious.

ALLERGIC RHINITIS TREATMENT

