

# Is it an allergy or something else?

**A**pril showers bring May flowers—and for many people, congestion, sneezing, and itchy, runny eyes. But sometimes those symptoms, even in the spring, don't stem from plant and tree pollen but from dust mites and pet dander. And at least a third of people who think they have allergies actually have a condition known as nonallergic rhinitis, a reaction that can be triggered by an infection, a sensitivity to chemicals or drugs, or changes in weather patterns.

Effective treatment starts with identifying the cause. But that doesn't always mean allergy tests, especially the ones now offered by some pharmacies or those you can buy to test yourself. Instead, learn about your symptoms, what brings relief, and when to see a doctor.

## IDENTIFY THE CAUSE

If you suspect that your symptoms are caused by an allergy, you can often get confirmation—and relief—by taking the simple steps described below.

But if you're uncertain or the measures don't help, talk with a doctor. A physical exam and a few questions about your symptoms, environmental and occupational exposure, hobbies, overall health, and other factors should help narrow it down. If necessary, an allergy skin test, which involves pricking the skin with a tiny amount of the suspected allergens, can confirm a diagnosis. A little redness shows that you have an allergy; no reaction suggests nonallergic rhinitis.

Be wary of any allergy test that's not guided by symptoms, a doctor's exam, and your medical history. The free tests offered in pharmacies or home tests that you can buy often check for common allergens, including cat dander, cedar, dust mites, egg, and grass. But such tests are often misleading and can cause you to make unnecessary lifestyle changes.



**Pollen from trees, grass, and weeds can trigger allergy symptoms, such as itchy, watery eyes and a scratchy throat.**

## COPING WITH ALLERGIES

If you do have an allergy, the following recommendations often help.

- **Avoid allergens.** For outdoor allergies, check pollen and mold spore levels with the National Allergy Bureau at [aaaai.org](http://aaaai.org). When counts are high, stay indoors with the windows shut and air conditioner on. For indoor allergies, use an air conditioner or dehumidifier, remove carpeting from bedrooms, wash rugs, curtains and bedding often,

and vacuum regularly. To control dust mites, encase your mattress, box spring, and pillows in allergen-proof covers. Keep pets out of your bedroom. Fix leaks and ventilate rooms, and clean up mold promptly.

- **Use the right drug.** The best first choice is often a generic version of the over-the-counter antihistamines cetirizine, fexofenadine, or loratadine. All cost less than their brand-name counterparts (*Zyrtec*, *Allegra*, and *Claritin*, respectively). Prescription steroid nasal sprays, such as fluticasone (*Flonase* and generic), are effective. Stop using them if they cause irritation or nosebleeds.

## FOR NONALLERGIC RHINITIS

Start by trying to avoid known triggers. If a drug is the culprit, ask your doctor about trying an alternative. If you can't avoid the trigger, consider using prescription steroid nasal sprays for treating serious allergies beforehand, or with the prescription nasal antihistamine azelastine (*Astelin*, *Astepro*, and generic). Steroid sprays also work well for persistent symptoms. ■

## Check your symptoms

Not sure whether it's an allergy or something else? You can determine which is which by comparing these symptoms, timeframes, and triggers.

### ALLERGIES

**Symptoms:** Congestion, itchy and watery eyes, clear nasal discharge, sneezing, and scratchy or ticklish throat.  
**When:** Outdoor allergies usually start in February or March and end in October. Indoor ones often last year-round, though they can come and go.  
**Triggers:** Pollen from trees, grass, and weeds; indoor and outdoor mold; pet dander; dust mites; flakes of dried skin; and cockroach feces, saliva, or body parts.

### NONALLERGIC RHINITIS

**Symptoms:** Congestion, runny nose, and sneezing, but without the itchy eyes or sore throat.  
**When:** Often lasts year-round, though periodically.  
**Triggers:** Respiratory infections, changes in weather and temperature, cold or dry air, food (especially spicy items), alcohol, strong odors or fumes, cigarette smoke, perfume, air pollution, and certain medications, notably aspirin, ibuprofen (*Advil* and generic), naproxen (*Aleve* and generic), certain blood pressure drugs, and erectile dysfunction drugs, such as sildenafil (*Viagra*), tadalafil (*Cialis*), and tamsulosin (*Flomax*).