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Advice From Your Allergist About Rhinitis

What is rhinitis?

Rhinitis is a term describing the symptoms produced by nasal irritation or inflammation. Symptoms of rhinitis are due to blockage or congestion. They include:

- Runny, stuffy and itchy nose
- Sneezing
- Itchy, red and watery eyes
- Loss or change of smell
- Drainage in the back of the throat (post-nasal drip)

What causes rhinitis?

The nose normally produces mucus to trap substances (dust, pollen and pollution) and germs (bacteria and viruses). Mucus flows from the front of the nose and drains down the back of the throat. When too much mucus is made, it can cause a runny nose from the front or post-nasal drip to the back. Cough is the natural response to clearing the throat from post-nasal drip.

What is allergic rhinitis?

Allergic rhinitis, commonly known as hay fever, affects more than 15 percent of adults and children. It can affect people differently. Major patterns include:

- **Seasonal rhinitis:** symptoms occur in spring, summer and/or early fall. They are usually caused by sensitivity to pollens from trees, grasses or weeds, or from airborne mold spores.

- **Perennial rhinitis:** symptoms may occur any time of the year. They are generally caused by sensitivity to house dust mites, animals, cockroaches and/or mold spores. Underlying or hidden food allergies almost never cause perennial nasal symptoms.
- **Episodic rhinitis:** symptoms from an indoor allergen that is infrequently encountered. For example, a person staying overnight at a house where there is a cat to which the person is allergic, may have symptoms.

What is an allergy?

When you have an allergy, your body's immune system overreacts by attacking harmless things such as dust, molds or pollen. The body treats these as invaders and releases chemicals in defense. These "protective chemicals" cause allergic symptoms that can range from mild to severe. Hundreds of ordinary things can trigger an allergic reaction. These are called "allergens." Some of the most common are plant pollens, molds, dust mites, cockroaches, pets and feathers. Irritants, such as tobacco smoke, cleaning chemicals and strong odors – and some medicines taken for other medical conditions – may also contribute to and increase the symptoms in patients who have allergic rhinitis.

Can allergic rhinitis cause other problems?

Some known complications include:

- Ear infections

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- Sinusitis
- Recurrent sore throat
- Cough
- Altered sleep patterns
- Fatigue and irritability
- Headache
- Poor school performance

What is infectious rhinitis?

The most common cause of rhinitis is the common cold, an example of infectious rhinitis. Most infections are relatively short-lived, with symptoms improving in three to seven days. Colds can be caused by any one of more than 200 viruses.

Colds usually begin with congestion and/or sore throat. Then runny nose and sneezing may follow. Over the next few days, congestion may become worse. Nasal mucus may become colored, and there may be a fever and/or cough. Cold symptoms go away within 1-2 weeks, although a cough may sometimes persist longer. Cold symptoms that last longer may be due to other causes, such as non-infectious rhinitis or sinusitis. Fever is frequently a distinguishing feature of infectious rhinitis.

What causes non-allergic rhinitis?

Non-allergic rhinitis, or vasomotor rhinitis, is not caused by allergy or infection. Other causes of recurrent or chronic nasal congestion, excess mucus, itching, and other nasal symptoms include:

- **Chemicals and irritants:** such as smoke (especially tobacco smoke), air pollution, cosmetics, detergents and cleaning solutions.
- **Physical factors:** such as mechanical blockage and changes in weather or temperature.
- **Medicines:** such as NSAIDs (ibuprofen, aspirin), certain blood pressure medicines (beta-blockers), birth control pills and other female hormone preparations, and prolonged use of over-the-counter decongestant nasal sprays or illicit cocaine use.
- **Hormonal factors:** such as under-active thyroid or hormone changes during pregnancy.
- **Alcohol and tobacco:** Alcoholic beverages (particularly beer and wine) can cause the blood vessels in the nose to enlarge temporarily and produce significant nasal congestion.

Non-allergic rhinitis often can't be cured. Fortunately, symptoms often end abruptly and reduced by avoiding exposure to triggers and by taking medicine when needed.

Many patients have a combination of allergic and non-allergic rhinitis, which seem to increase the severity of their rhinitis symptoms. Once the inflammation of allergic rhinitis is fully controlled, often with medication or allergy shots, patients experience minimal symptoms from the same irritants that used to cause major problems.

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