

S2S Health

by Margie Monin Dombrowski

SNEEZE

AND SNIFF

Are you suffering from allergies, or could it be something else? Here's how to know, and how to feel better

If all too often you're itchy and sneezing with a runny nose, it's time to do something about it. It could just be an allergy, but an allergy could also turn into something more serious if you ignore it. The good news is that you have plenty of ways to address your symptoms, find out what's ailing you and take charge of your health.

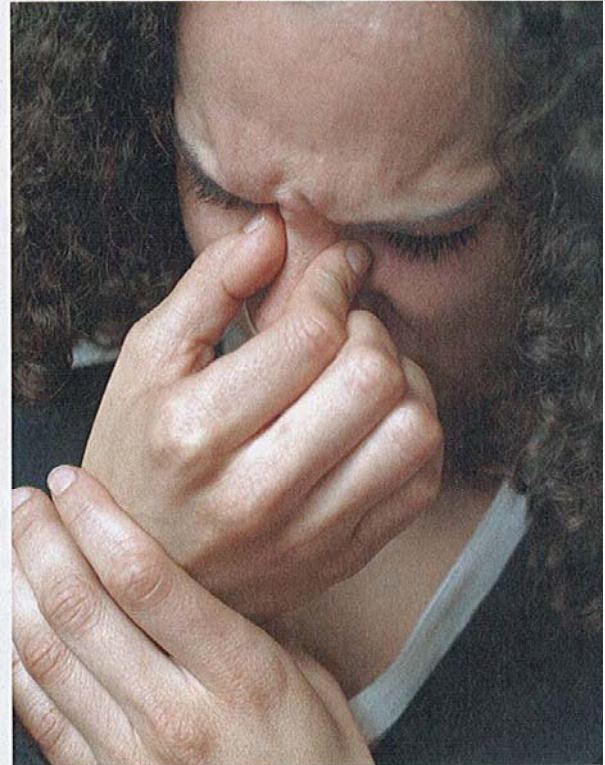
Something in the air—and your genes

About 20 to 25 percent of the world's population is allergic to airborne agents. Allergies, also called allergic rhinitis or hay fever, (even though allergies have nothing to do with hay and your temperature does not rise), can be an occasional but minor inconvenience for some, while others may experience them frequently enough to affect their daily lives.

"In order to experience an allergy," said Dr. Michael Foggs, chief of allergy and immunology for Advocate Health Care in Chicago, "you have to inherit a combination of genes." That combination, he said, allows your immune system to recognize airborne agents and try to reject them, causing symptoms. "Tissue is going haywire as it tries to deal with the agents," he said.

Telltale symptoms of an allergic reaction include itchy, burning or watery eyes; sneezing; a runny nose; congestion; itchiness in your ears or the back or roof of your mouth; trouble sleeping and clear mucus.

Allergens are seasonal, and it varies by geographical region as to what months the pollen from trees, grasses and weeds are out in full force to trigger your allergic reaction. Then there are perennial allergens (dust mites, mold, pet



danger) that are always around to aggravate those who are allergic to them. Spring, mistakenly dubbed the "allergy season," is simply when allergens—or the types of pollen that you are allergic to—are first activated in most regions of the country. If you live in a warm climate such as California or Florida, allergens are present year-round because they don't freeze over.

Once you know when the different types of allergens in your region are present and which ones you react to, you will know what to stay away from.

Is it an allergy, sinus problems or worse?

"It's easy to say, 'Avoid allergens,'" said Dr. Frank Spinelli, associate professor of clinical medicine, who has a private practice affiliated with St. Vincent's Hospital in New York City. "But it's hard to do that when you don't know what they are." That's why he suggests seeing a doctor, not only to find out what you are allergic to but to find out if you may be suffering from a sinus infection instead. The average person can't tell the difference between allergy and sinus infection symptoms. Sinus infections usually come with a fever and green or yellow mucus, while allergies do not. But it's not always that cut and dry. If your symptoms are bothersome and over-the-counter meds aren't working, it's best to take a trip to a doctor who can assess your symptoms and medical history, conduct a physical exam and run tests.

A physician can run blood and skin tests that will easily pinpoint exactly what you are allergic to. It's ideal to see an ear, nose & throat specialist or allergist because they have more years of training in identifying allergies and know how

best to properly treat allergies and sinus problems.

If your symptoms happen frequently, seeing a specialist is essential. Dr. Marjorie L. Slankard, clinical professor of medicine at Columbia Doctors Eastside in New York City, said that if you have one nostril that is persistently clogged, bleeding or hurting, or symptoms that don't go away with typical over-the-counter drugs, you need to have a doctor check it out. "It could be a septal deviation or physically less space," Dr. Slankard said. The patient could then need antibiotics, a CT scan or prescription medications.

Fighting off flare-ups

You can usually treat allergies yourself with one of the many over-the-counter drugs at your drugstore as a first line of defense. "If you notice allergy symptoms, self-medicate and it goes

away, then it was probably an allergy" and not a sinus infection, said Dr. Spinelli.

There are also simple home remedies you can try to combat allergy symptoms. Dr. Slankard has plenty of tips to share. "One of the main things is to not rub your eyes," she said. Instead, rinse out itchy eyes with over-the-counter saline eye drops. Keep the drops in the refrigerator for a soothing and cooling effect, and apply a cool pack to your eyes, she suggested. You can clear out congested sinuses—whether caused by allergies or a sinus infection—with a homemade saline wash. Just mix warm water with a teaspoon of kosher salt or sea salt (without iodine) in a Neti pot, which is a small pot used for nasal irrigation that originates from Ayurvedic medicine. Insert it into each nostril and rinse as needed. Also, be sure to wash the pollen out of your hair and sheets to prevent it from

itching and irritating you. Windows and air conditioners with filters can keep pollen out and prevent allergy symptoms as well.

Immunotherapy is another option for allergy sufferers. The treatment trains you to have a normal reaction to allergens by exposing your body to them through subcutaneous injections. When successful, the treatment can lessen symptoms and medication needs. It's worked for about 80 percent of allergy sufferers who have tried it, so it's worth asking your doctor about.

Be sure to take action and do something about your allergies because untreated or improperly treated allergies can turn into a sinus infection or asthma, and they may even lead to death. No matter how minor you may think your allergies are, make an appointment with your doctor and find out for certain what is really going on. **S**

When It's Something More Serious

If you experience allergies, then listen up because that could mean something more dire: asthma. Asthma can mimic allergy symptoms, and improperly treated allergies can increase your risk of asthma, making it important to pay attention to what your body is telling you.

There are 22 million Americans with asthma, which causes 4,000 deaths each year. Asthma is a health issue that could mean life or death to African Americans—women especially.

Asthma symptoms can be easily overlooked. They include shortness of breath or difficulty breathing while exercising, nighttime coughing, or colds that tend to settle in the chest. The same things that trigger allergies, such as pollen, dust and pet dander, also trigger asthma attacks. If any of these pertain to you, you might want to visit an asthma specialist.

"Everyone with rhinitis should be screened for asthma," said Dr. Michael Foggs, who is running an asthma screening campaign with the Nationwide Asthma Screening Program and is reaching out to African-American women.

Asthmatics, he said, could have mild symptoms of allergy. "Poorly controlled rhinitis, or hay fever, can trigger an asthma attack in a person, increasing the risk of the person without asthma to develop asthma with untreated allergies," he said. What causes asthma is unknown, but treatments available through asthma specialists can improve your quality of life.

Dr. Foggs popularized the fact that all African-American women should be treated as high-risk for premature death from asthma. Based on statistics, African-American women are at a higher risk for death from asthma than any other group because a higher proportion of them live in inner cities where they are exposed to such allergy triggers as dust mites, rodent droppings, cockroaches and cigarette smoking. Other contributing factors may include depression and obesity rates. Oddly, upper crust African Americans are also at high-risk, and those reasons are being explored.

For information on asthma and a free screening near you, visit allergyandasthma-relief.org.

