

ALLERGIC RHINITIS

Allergic rhinitis is inflammation of nasal membranes. At least 20 percent of children have allergic rhinitis, which is sometimes called hay fever, or “allergies.” Allergic rhinitis can be seasonal and associated with asthma, ear infections and chronic sinus infections. Allergic rhinitis usually follows a spring and/or fall pattern, causing children to have sneezing and runny nose usually associated with exposure to grasses, trees, and weed pollens. Some children have allergic rhinitis year round, which can be triggered by dust, animal dander, mold or smoke.

Two factors are required to have allergic rhinitis – a family predisposition and exposure to allergens. Allergens are inhaled microscopic airborne particles. Repeated exposure to the particles leads to “allergies.”

The symptoms of allergic rhinitis are itchy and/or watery eyes, nasal obstruction from swelling of nasal membranes, sneezing, nasal discharge, itchy throat and cough and sometimes asthma and eczema are symptoms of allergic rhinitis. Other symptoms include snoring, fatigue, general malaise, and poor school performance. Children with allergic rhinitis frequently have upper respiratory infections, which can lead to ear infections. On exam children with allergic rhinitis might also have dark circles under their eyes. If nasal congestion becomes severe enough, children with allergic rhinitis might become habitual mouth breathers. A doctor may look in the nose and say the turbinates are pale and swollen. While these symptoms are similar to symptoms of a common cold, diagnosis will be made based on a history of when and for how long the symptoms appear, and by the lack of fever, and the presence of the dark circles under the eyes. In some cases allergy testing may be done to determine the exact allergens.

Children with allergic rhinitis may develop chronic symptoms including recurring ear infections, diarrhea and vomiting from drainage, labored breathing and chronic stuffy nose.

Treatment for allergic rhinitis includes avoiding the allergens that cause the symptoms. Also antihistamines may be prescribed to block the allergic response. In young children benedryl may be suggested. For children over 6 the doctor may suggest an over the counter allergy medicine such as Claritin or Zyrtec to help control symptoms. In more severe cases the doctor may prescribe corticosteroids, these anti-inflammatory drugs help prevent the inflammation that leads to allergy symptoms. If medications fail, the doctor may suggest allergy shots (or immunotherapy).

The most effective way to control symptoms is to avoid the allergens. Parents can limit the number of allergic reactions by keeping children indoors during the periods when they are most affected by exposure to pollens outside and by keeping windows closed during peak allergy season. Filters may be used in the furnace, such as HEPA filters, which remove allergens from the indoor air. Keeping the child's room free of carpet and excessive stuffed animals, and washing bedding and stuffed animals frequently can help. Washing pets frequently and keeping them out of children's rooms can also help. Children with allergies should bathe and wash their hair daily to remove environmental allergens from their bodies.

Talk to your doctor if you are concerned that your child has allergic rhinitis as there are many treatment options to help children control allergy symptoms.