

ALLERGIC RHINITIS

“Allergic rhinitis” is the medical term for allergy affecting the mucous membrane of the nose. Seasonal allergic rhinitis is often called hay fever, while year-round nasal allergy is called perennial allergic rhinitis. People with allergic rhinitis often think they have “sinus trouble.” When no specific allergy can be found but nose symptoms are present, the condition is called vasomotor rhinitis. Most people develop allergic rhinitis before age 30. An estimated 13 million Americans suffer from hay fever—primarily due to ragweed pollen allergy.

SYMPTOMS: Allergic rhinitis can cause many symptoms, including stuffed up nose, postnasal drainage, sneezing, red, itchy, and watery eyes, swollen eyelids, itching of the mouth, throat, ears, and face, sore throat, cough, feelings of fullness and buzzing of the ears, partial loss of the senses of hearing, smell, and taste, and headaches in the front part of the head. Seasonal allergic rhinitis can also cause more general symptoms, such as fatigue.

Because of the symptoms, allergic rhinitis is often thought to be a cold. But whenever the symptoms occur repeatedly throughout the year, allergy can be suspected. The discharge from the nose in allergic rhinitis is usually thin and clear. In the person with a cold, it is usually thicker and yellowish due to infection. Unfortunately, when the membrane or the nose becomes irritated by allergy, it is easier for germs and viruses to invade and multiply. Therefore, it is not uncommon for a person to have both allergic rhinitis and infection.

Persons with allergic rhinitis often have dark circles under their eyes. To relieve an itching nose, children especially, may develop the habit of pushing the nose up with the palm of the hand. After a few years, this can cause a crease (called an “allergic crease”) to appear across the nose. Also, the

midpart of the nose may broaden from the pressure of swollen tissue underneath. The mouth may be open continually so the person can breathe better. Children may develop a variety of other mannerisms which parents find annoying but which are caused by the allergy.

Allergic rhinitis usually results from allergy to a variety of things including pollen, dust, mold, and food. The nose is especially reactive because it contains many cells filled with histamine, which become sensitized and release the histamine upon contact with an allergen.

The symptoms of allergic rhinitis result from the action of histamine and other chemicals released in the allergic reaction. These chemicals cause swelling and a resulting decrease in the size of the nose opening, making breathing more difficult. They also stimulate the inner lining of the nose to secrete watery mucus, causing a runny nose or post nasal drainage. These discharges irritate nerve endings, which cause sneezing and also possibly sore throat. When the mucous discharge travels from the throat up the tube going into the ear (eustachian tube), it causes a feeling of fullness and buzzing. When it goes up the sinuses, it causes a pressure headache.

COMPLICATIONS: If allergic rhinitis is not treated, symptoms of both allergy and infection can develop in the throat, ears, and sinuses because these areas are lined with the same kind of membrane as the nose. Tonsils and adenoids may become enlarged and diseased, and growths called polyps may develop in the nose. Fluid can also build up in the ear—a condition called serous otitis media. This condition is particularly common in babies and young children. Sinus problems following allergic rhinitis are more common in older children and adults.