

Children snivelling or sneezing, scratching or wheezing?

Could it be an **ALLERGY?**

An allergic reaction can be serious or just irritating. But with symptoms often similar to many other childhood ailments, how do you know if your child is having an allergic reaction? Child magazine asked Dr Janet Collinson, Consultant Paediatrician at Northampton General Hospital to separate the facts from the myths.



What is an allergy?

Allergy occurs when the body's immune system overreacts to a normally harmless substance. This in turn can cause inconvenience, or a great deal of misery.

An allergy is everything from a runny nose, itchy eyes to skin rash, wheezing and in rare cases severe illness or extremely rarely, fatality. Allergy affects approximately one in four of the population in the UK at some time in their lives. Each year the numbers are increasing by 5% with as many as half of all those affected being children.

What causes allergy ?

Allergic reactions are caused by substances in the environment known as allergens which are usually proteins that our body recognises as being foreign. Our body then develops antibodies or other immune responses to the foreign protein so that when we meet the allergen again symptoms occur. Almost anything can be an allergen for someone, including the proteins in certain foods.

Who is most likely to develop allergies?

All allergic conditions are more likely if the child already has a tendency to allergy by having hayfever, asthma or eczema. The tendency to allergy is genetically inherited and so it is very common to find allergy in children where there is a family history of allergic conditions.

What are the most common allergens?

The most common allergens are: pollen from trees and grasses, house dust mite, moulds, and hair from animals. These airborne allergens tend to cause problems in the nose or airways. Other allergens include the sting (venom) from wasps and bees, chemicals, medicines, and foods such as milk and eggs. Common food allergens include nuts particularly peanuts, seafood and occasionally fruit and latex.

What happens in allergy?

In the most common type of allergy the immune system develops an antibody (known as IgE) to the allergen. When the IgE antibody meets the allergen special chemicals are released, which makes blood vessels and other body cells leaky which causes the symptoms.

Are all allergic reactions the same?

No – allergies cover a vast range across a spectrum from minor irritation to a severe reaction. Also allergies can have

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at least 4 different mechanisms, each one involving different antibodies or immune cells that have different timings. The allergy involving IgE is usually the fastest reaction usually occurs within hours or minutes of exposure to the allergen. The other types of allergies can cause reactions that often occur several days later.

What are the most common symptoms?

The symptoms include rashes (hives or nettle-rash), facial swelling, runny nose, sneezing, vomiting, diarrhoea, and more rarely breathing difficulties such as wheezing, drowsiness or unresponsiveness.

Can an allergy reaction be dangerous?

A severe allergic reaction can be fatal but this is extremely rare – you are more likely to die in a road traffic accident or to win the lottery.

What is Anaphylaxis?

A severe potentially life threatening allergic reaction that includes wheezing, difficulty in breathing, noisy breathing, drowsiness or loss of consciousness is known as anaphylaxis. Symptoms can occur within minutes to four hours after contact with the allergy-causing substance. Emergency medical help should be sought if any of these symptoms occur. Being asthmatic is a risk factor for anaphylaxis.

Sufferers who have had an extreme reaction need special tests to help identify which allergen caused the anaphylaxis. If the allergen was contained in food then expert dietary advice will be necessary to avoid causing further episodes of severe allergic reactions. Sufferers of severe allergic reactions are usually issued with a special device called an auto-injector, to reverse the effects of a serious reaction.

Why are allergies often confused with other conditions?

All the symptoms mentioned can be caused by many other factors other than allergy.

Is Food Intolerance the same as Allergy?

No. This is when your system can't handle a particular food type and eating it makes you poorly. A good example of this is lactose intolerance. Lactose is the major sugar in milk and some people lack the enzyme to digest lactose so may develop tummy ache or diarrhoea after drinking milk.

Also sometimes people have a psychological aversion – this is when something has made them very sick once in their life, and the memory of it makes them want to avoid it.

Is there a cure for allergies?

Usually it's a case of managing the allergy by avoiding contact with the allergen.

For food allergies you need to adapt your diet, with expert help, to avoid the food you are allergic to.

If your allergy is to pollen you can reduce your exposure to the allergen by keeping bedroom windows closed. If your allergy is to animal fur you may need to rehome a pet. There are also nasal sprays, inhalers and anti-histamine medicines that are used to control symptoms.

Do children grow out of allergies?

Sometimes children will outgrow their allergies. 80% of children outgrow their egg and milk allergy between the ages of 3 and 5 years. Most children over the age of 5 years tend to not outgrow their allergies.

What should you do if you suspect your child has an allergy?

Go along to your health visitor or doctor and discuss the problem. It helps if you write down what happened. If a reaction occurred after eating food keep the ingredient list of the food. If your child has an allergic reaction where they experience breathing difficulties or become drowsy or unresponsive, then you should call for medical help immediately by ringing an ambulance.

ALLERGY PREVENTION FOR BABIES

- > Do not smoke in pregnancy or near your children
- > Exclusive breastfeeding for six months is helpful if there is a family history of eczema, asthma or allergy. Breast feeding until age 2 years is also recommended
- > Avoid using any creams or lotions on the skin containing peanut oil or other common food allergens such as egg white as this can promote later allergic reactions to food containing these foodstuffs.
- > Do not introduce solids until six months old or later.
- > Introduce one new food per week.
- > Start with rice, pears, yellow and root vegetables.
- > Introduce wheat, soy, dairy, beans & lentils at 9-12 months.
- > Avoid eggs until the age of 18 months.
- > Avoid peanuts and nuts, until the age of 3- 5years – nuts also pose a very real threat of causing choking.
- > Avoid processed meats, chocolate, colourings, and artificial flavourings when weaning.