

Allergies cover a very broad range of triggers and symptoms, from food and environmental allergies to skin rashes and life-threatening anaphylaxis. Unfortunately, allergies don't only affect millions of people in the first few weeks of spring, there are multiple allergy seasons throughout the course of the year, and a pandemic can make allergy suffering even worse.

## How common are allergies?

The UK has some of the highest prevalence rates of allergic conditions in the world, with over 20% of the population affected by one or more allergic disorder. (M. L. Levy, 2004)

A staggering 44% of British adults now suffer from at least one allergy and the number of sufferers is on the rise, growing by around 2 million between 2008 and 2009 alone. Almost half (48%) of sufferers have more than one allergy. (Intel, 2010)

In the space of 20 years (from 1992 to 2012) there was a 615% increase in the rate of hospital admissions for anaphylaxis in the UK. (Turner, Paul J., et al, 2015)

Allergy UK has many more [statistics](#) on eczema, asthma, anaphylaxis and allergic rhinitis (hay fever).

## What is an allergic reaction?

An allergic reaction occurs when a person's immune system becomes hypersensitive to certain substances, and a substance that causes an allergic reaction is called an allergen.

The treatment for an allergy depends on what you're allergic to. The best way to keep symptoms under control is often to avoid the things you're allergic to, although this isn't always possible.

## What can trigger an allergy?

There are so many things that you come into contact with every day which could cause an allergic reaction and, whilst many people are unaffected by them, common triggers include:

- **Airborne allergens** – such as pollen, animal dander, dust mites and mould
- **Certain foods** – especially peanuts, tree nuts, wheat, soy, fish, shellfish, eggs and milk
- **Medications** – particularly penicillin or penicillin-based antibiotics
- **Insect stings** – such as from a bee or wasp
- **Harmful substances** – in many cleaning products

## When is the most common time to encounter allergens?

Although springtime is a common time of year for many allergy sufferers to experience hay fever symptoms such as sneezing, a runny or stuffy nose, itching, watery, red or swollen

eyes, the summer sees a continuation of grass pollen, which is replaced with fungus spores and mould spores that grow on grasses, compost piles and fallen leaves in the autumn.

Indoor allergies continue during the winter months. Even the innocent Christmas tree can harbour microscopic mould spores and turning up the heat in the cold months creates a humid environment for dust mites to thrive in and, without adequate ventilation, house dust pollutes the quality of the air you breathe. Tree pollen begins to re-appear followed by flower pollen in spring, and so the cycle starts all over again.

## **How has the pandemic affected allergy sufferers?**

It's fair to say that since it became mandatory to wear face coverings in indoor places where social distancing may be difficult, non-clinical face masks have become a wardrobe staple.

It's become part of our daily routine to check we have a face covering before we leave the house and, although it's believed there may be a reduction of allergic rhinitis symptoms with face mask usage, skin allergies can also develop due to their regular use.

Increased hand hygiene can also influence skin reactions including dryness, irritation, itching, and even cracking and bleeding. However, an allergy to some ingredients in a hand hygiene product can cause allergic contact dermatitis, and in its most serious form, it may be associated with respiratory distress and other symptoms of anaphylaxis.

## **What can you do to manage allergens?**

You may be able to help manage food allergies by being careful about what you eat, or control animal allergies by allowing pets outside as much as possible and washing them regularly.

Mould allergies could be reduced by keeping your home dry and well-ventilated, and by dealing quickly with any damp and condensation. Dust mites could be kept at bay by using allergy-proof duvets and pillows, fitting wooden floors rather than carpets, and keeping rooms aerated if possible.

If you are a hay fever sufferer it's advised that you try to stay indoors and avoid grassy areas when the pollen count is high, and the NHS also recommends you should:

- Put Vaseline around your nostrils to trap pollen
- Wear wraparound sunglasses to stop pollen getting into your eyes
- Shower and change your clothes after you have been outside to wash pollen off
- Not dry clothes outside because they can catch pollen
- Stay indoors whenever possible
- Keep windows and doors shut as much as possible
- Vacuum regularly, ideally with one that has a HEPA filter, and dust with a damp cloth

- Add a pollen filter for the air vents in your car

Sometimes, allergens just can't be avoided so you could take antihistamines which may be purchased at a pharmacy or prescribed by a GP. Decongestants can be useful to clear blocked or stuffy noses because pollens adhere to mucus membranes. And last but not least, try to manage your stress. Stress hormones wreak havoc in the body and especially in the immune system, making seasonal allergies even worse.

## **What should employers be doing to support staff with allergies?**

Employers have a duty of care to their staff and must carry out risk assessments to identify any potential hazards, including substances which may trigger allergies. This may include controlling the risk of substances which are hazardous to health, known as COSHH.

Latex allergy is a common allergy, particularly in healthcare settings, and natural rubber latex (NRL) contains proteins to which some individuals may develop an allergy. So it's important that the right gloves are chosen to prevent skin problems.

Employers should ask staff during induction if they have any allergies and regularly check this, encouraging staff to notify their line manager if they develop an allergy to a substance in the workplace. Airborne allergens (which are not necessarily food-related) may cause particular challenges, especially in open-plan workplaces.

For staff with known allergies, employers should check if they take any antihistamines that make them feel drowsy because they mustn't drive or use machinery after taking them. Or if they need an adrenaline auto-injector (such as an EpiPen) the member of staff should be able to access this easily.

In most health and social care settings, staff should be trained to recognise the signs and symptoms of a life-threatening anaphylactic reaction and have the confidence to act promptly in administering emergency treatment and know how to administer adrenaline auto-injectors to someone in an emergency.

## **Where to find out more about awareness and training**

Allergy Awareness Week takes place 26 – 30 April this year. World Allergy Week 2021 takes place 13 - 19 June and will focus on the topic of Anaphylaxis.