Allergic rhinitis in children

This leaflet gives you information about allergic rhinitis, what it is, and how you can help your child with their allergy.
What is allergic rhinitis?

Allergic rhinitis is the inflammation of the inside of the nose caused by an allergen (something your child is allergic to). This could be pollen, dust, mould or animals.

Allergic rhinitis happens when the body reacts to these allergens as if they are harmful and produces allergic antibodies (IGE) to “fight” them. This causes chemicals to be released in the body and sets off the symptoms you get with allergic rhinitis. Most children have mild symptoms, but these can affect their sleep, play and school activities. Fortunately, most symptoms can be treated easily and effectively.

Types of allergic rhinitis

If your child’s symptoms happen at particular times of the year, doctors call it “seasonal allergic rhinitis”. This can be caused by an allergic reaction to pollen from grass, trees and weeds during the early spring and summer months. This type of allergic reaction is known as hay fever. It usually affects children over 5 years, but sometimes younger children can suffer from it too. The severity of symptoms varies but is usually worse if there is a high pollen count.

Some children can suffer with allergic rhinitis all year round. Doctors call this “Perennial allergic rhinitis”. This is usually set off by an allergy to things that your child might be exposed to all year round – such as house dust mites, pets (including birds), or mould.

What are the symptoms?

- Itchy eyes/ throat
- Sneezing, blocked/runny nose
- Watering, red eyes (allergic conjunctivitis)
- Headaches, blocked sinuses
- Shortness of breath
- Tiredness
- The feeling of mucus running down the back of the throat. (Doctors call this symptom “post nasal drip”).

**How is allergic rhinitis diagnosed?**

A diagnosis can usually be made by your GP. They will ask you and your child about their allergy symptoms and triggers along with examining the inside of your child’s nose, eyes, and throat. Occasionally, allergy tests (such as skin prick tests) are performed in hospital if the diagnosis is unclear.

**Why is it important to treat?**

It’s uncomfortable for the child and may make sleep and concentration difficult. If left untreated, it can also make other conditions, such as asthma, much worse.

**How can it be treated?**

The following measures can be very effective and improve your child’s quality of life. These include advice on allergy avoidance and medications.

Most medical treatment suggested here will require a prescription so always ask your GP for advice and treatment if needed.

**Avoiding allergens**

Tests can be useful to find out which allergens might be causing the symptoms of allergic rhinitis. Avoiding allergens is really important. For some allergens, avoidance can be fairly straightforward, for others it may be a bit more difficult.
Pollen

It can be difficult to avoid exposure to pollens, but you might want to try some of the following tips to see if these make a difference.

✓ Check weather reports for the pollen count and try and keep your child indoors if it is high
✓ Try to avoid going out on windy days or after thunderstorms
✓ Wear sunglasses to protect the eyes
✓ On high pollen days, showering on arriving home and rinsing the eyes frequently with a free-flowing water can help
✓ Stay inside if the grass is being mown.
✓ If your child is sensitive to particular weeds or trees that are outside the bedroom window, have them removed and replace with low allergen plants.
✓ Avoid picnics in parks or open grassland during the pollen season
✓ Keep windows closed both at home and particularly when in the car. If possible, use re-circulating air conditioning in the car.
✓ Try to plan family holidays out of the pollen season, or holiday at the seaside.
✓ Don’t dry your children’s clothes or bedding outside on a drying line when the pollen count is high.

Pets

It’s not the pet’s fur that causes allergic reactions - it’s being exposed to their dead skin, saliva and urine. While it may be quite easy to avoid certain animals such as horses and other people’s domestic pet cats or dogs, many families are understandably reluctant to give away their own pets when they cause symptoms. If you cannot permanently remove a pet from your home these tips might be useful

✓ Keep pets outside as much as you can, or limit them to one room, preferably one without a carpet
Keep pets out of bedrooms
✓ Wash pets once a fortnight
✓ Groom dogs outside
✓ Wash bedding and soft furnishing if the pet has been on it

**House dusts mites**

These are microscopic insects which breed in household dust. They can be difficult to control. To limit the number of dust mites you can:

✓ Use anti-allergenic mattress and pillow barriers
✓ Regularly clean cushions, soft toys and soft furnishings and carpets
✓ Use synthetic pillows/blankets instead of woollen and feather bedding
✓ Use a vacuum cleaner with a HEPA filter which can reduce dust more effectively
✓ Use a damp cloth to wipe surfaces – as dry dusting can spread allergens more
✓ Concentrate the cleaning on areas in the home most used by your child.

**Mould spores**

Moulds release spores which can cause allergy. Moulds can grow outdoor (on rotting leaves) or indoor (where there is excessive moisture). Moulds favour damp, musty conditions. To help prevent these:

✓ Keep your home dry and well ventilated
✓ When cooking and using the bath/shower keep internal doors shut to stop moist air spreading
✓ Use extractor fans
✓ Avoid drying clothes indoors or packing clothes or bedding too tightly in cupboards
✓ Don’t ignore damp and condensation at home. Get advice on how to tackle it.

Medical treatment

Oral antihistamines

Antihistamines are the best known type of allergy medication. Chlorphenamine (Piriton) is available from a pharmacy without prescription for children above the age of 1 year.

Antihistamines used to have a reputation for making people drowsy, but many modern antihistamines are non-sedative and are very safe to be used. Cetirizine and loratidine are examples of non-sedating antihistamines and can also be purchased from a pharmacy without prescription for children above the age of 2 years. Please be aware that some branded versions of these medicines may advise that children may need to be older.

Antihistamines need to be taken regularly during the pollen season to work properly, even if your child seems symptom-free. This is because your child might seem OK in the morning but later in the day may develop more allergy symptoms.

Nasal sprays

Nasal sprays deliver antihistamines or steroids directly to the passages of the nose. Nasal antihistamines help with symptoms of itching and sneezing, but they should only be used for short periods of time.

Steroid nasal sprays are used to control the inflammation in the nasal lining and can help relieve eye symptoms. They are the preferred option to use regularly during the season when your child
has the most symptoms. Steroid sprays are generally not used in children under the age of four.

Steroid nasal sprays can take several days to fully work but, once they do, they are very effective at reducing the symptoms caused by airborne allergens and the effects of allergic rhinitis. This medication is particularly useful if started before exposure to the allergens. For example, children with allergic rhinitis will gain most benefit if steroid sprays are started a few weeks before the pollen season. It is important to follow the administration advice on the packet carefully.

**Eye Drops**

Eye drops can be particularly useful if eye symptoms are one of the main symptoms of allergic rhinitis. Many eye drops contain cromoglicate, which works by blocking the responses of the cells that release the histamine during an allergic reaction.

**Immunotherapy**

Immunotherapy is a specialist treatment that aims to stop the immune system from treating allergens as a threat.

Immunotherapy is prescribed for children with severe types of allergic rhinitis who are not responding to maximum medical treatment, or for children who also have an allergy as well as difficult to control asthma.

Immunotherapy is not a treatment that can be prescribed by your GP and is only used in a hospital with a specialist allergy department when other treatments have failed.
Trusted sources of further information

**Itchy Sneezy Wheezy Project Website** - Useful information and videos for children with allergies

https://www.itchysneezywheezy.co.uk/RhinitisVideos.html

**NHS Website**

https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/hay-fever/

**Centre for sustainable energy** – For advice on preventing damp and mould at home

https://www.cse.org.uk/advice/advice-and-support/damp-condensation