

Allergies: Your body's over-reaction to the everyday

We've all seen it happen. A child having a major meltdown for no apparent reason. Well, allergies are a little like that. They're a body's version of a temper tantrum – a physical over-reaction to something that for other people just isn't that bad.

When someone with allergies has contact with a certain something, their immune system goes into high alert. Their body believes it's harmful – whether it really is or not – and surround and attacks it. That's why some folks can be allergic to foods like nuts, seafood or dairy, while others can eat them without a problem.

Allergies are pretty common – one out of every five Americans has at least one. And we often inherit allergies from our parents. Besides food allergies, many people have reactions to pollens, molds, dust, pets, insect stings, even makeup and perfume. Whatever causes the problem is called an “allergen.”

When an allergen comes on the scene, your body's immune system sends white blood cells in to take care of business. The blood cells react by producing fighters called “antibodies.” Antibodies send in their own warriors in to fight, releasing a substance called “histamine.” All this activity is your body's way of getting rid of what it sees as a threat. And that inner battle is what causes an exaggerated physical response. And your misery. Some common allergy symptoms include:

- Coughing, sneezing
- Watery, red, swollen or itchy eyes
- Headache
- Runny or stuffy nose
- Rashes or itchy skin
- Stomach cramps or diarrhea in the case of food allergies
- Swelling and redness in the case of insect bites

A person's allergic reaction can be mild (feeling a bit under the weather) or stronger (feeling seriously ill). Most reactions go away once you get out of range of the problem. But sometimes an allergen can cause a severe, life-threatening response called “anaphylaxis” (an-uh-fil-ax-iss). This needs emergency room care right away. Symptoms can be dangerous or even cause death; they include trouble breathing, low blood pressure and passing out.

If you have other health problems, such as asthma or COPD, allergies can also make it harder to keep them under control.

Luckily, most people can get a handle on their allergies by staying away from triggers, or with shots or medicine. For more on allergies, visit the American Academy of Allergy Asthma and Immunology at aaaai.org.

