



During this time of year, the hills are covered with grass or wildflowers, and the birds and bees are busy, and that means a tough time for allergy sufferers. Children often have signs of nasal allergies or allergies in the eyes that appear red, irritated, and itchy. But what are some of the other symptoms? What causes them? And what can be done about them?

Allergies are conditions that involve the immune system. Sometimes, the immune system “thinks” that substances like ragweed, dust, or pollen are invaders and need to be eliminated to protect us. When this occurs, the body’s reaction leads to the signs and symptoms we think of as allergic reactions. The most severe form of allergic reaction is anaphylaxis which may be life-threatening. Asthma flare-ups, rashes, and itchy eyes and nose can also result.

Substances that are inhaled, eaten, touched, or injected can cause allergies. Often, it is unclear what caused a reaction. We do know that allergies run in families and that when a child is allergic to one substance, they tend to be allergic to others. Some scientists believe that there has been an increase in the number of allergic patients in recent years because our environment is too clean. Because the immune system doesn’t have to work so hard at protecting us, it over-reacts to harmless substances in the environment. This is called the hygiene hypothesis and it has gained momentum in the past couple of years.

Sometimes it can be difficult to determine if the symptoms are caused by allergies or a cold. Remember that allergies don’t cause fevers, don’t make the child “feel bad”, and usually they do vary with season or exposure.

We often treat patients with a variety of medicines, but families could try the following simple strategies (courtesy of the American Academy of Pediatrics) to minimize the exposure to allergy-causing-substances (allergens):

- Keep windows closed during pollen season
- Keep the house clean and try to reduce exposure to dust mites (in stuffed animals especially!)
- Avoid pets
- Avoid those things you suspect are causing the allergic symptoms in your child.
- Prevent smoke exposure.

See your pediatrician if you need more help or advice on allergies. He or she can tell if a referral to an allergist is needed and should be able to discuss any questions or concerns you might have.

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