

Eye Allergies

Believe your eyes, and see what they may be telling you.

If your child's eyes itch, are red, tearing or burning, pay attention to what they may be telling you. They may have eye allergies, or allergic conjunctivitis, a condition that affects millions of Americans. It is a condition that can occur alone, but often accompanies nasal allergy symptoms, such as sneezing, sniffing and a stuffy nose. And, while most people treat nasal allergy symptoms, they often ignore their itchy, red, watery eyes. Below are answers to questions about eye allergies and ways for you to recognize and treat the symptoms.

What causes eye allergies?

Just like hay fever and skin rashes, eye allergies develop when the body's immune system becomes sensitized and overreacts to something that is ordinarily harmless. An allergic reaction can occur whenever that "something" - called an allergen - comes into contact with your eyes. The allergen causes certain cells in the eye (called mast cells) to release histamine and other substances or chemicals that cause blood vessels in the eyes to swell, and the eyes to become itchy, red and watery.

What allergens trigger eye allergies?

Allergens that may be present indoors or outdoors can cause eye allergies. The most common outdoor airborne allergens are grass, tree and weed pollens. People who are sensitive to these allergens suffer from seasonal allergic conjunctivitis, the most common type of eye allergy.

Pet hair or dander, dust mites and molds are the most common indoor allergens. These indoor allergens can trigger symptoms for some people throughout the year, resulting in perennial allergic conjunctivitis.

How are eye allergies treated?

As with any allergy, the first approach for successful management of seasonal or perennial forms of eye allergy should be prevention or avoidance of the allergens that trigger your symptoms. Here are some avoidance tips to reduce exposure to allergens that affect your eyes.

- Stay indoors as much as possible when pollen counts are at their peak, usually during the mid-morning and early evening, and when wind is blowing pollens around.
- Keep windows closed and use air conditioning in your car and home. Air conditioning units should be kept clean. Avoid using window fans that can draw pollens and molds into the house.
- Wear glasses or sunglasses when outdoors to minimize pollen getting into your eyes.
- Avoid rubbing eyes, which will only irritate them or make your condition worse.

- Reduce dust mite exposure in your home, especially the bedroom. Bedding, particularly pillows, should be encased in "mite-proof" covers. Wash bedding often in hot water (at least 130°F). Keep humidity in your home low (between 30 percent and 50 percent).
- Clean floors with a damp rag or mop rather than dry dusting or sweeping.
- Wash your hands immediately after petting any animals. Remove and wash clothing after visiting friends with pets.
- If you have a pet to which you are allergic, keep it out of your house as much as possible. If the pet must be in the house, keep it out of the bedroom so you are not exposed to animal allergens while you sleep. Close the air ducts to your bedroom if you have forced-air or central heating/cooling. Replace carpeting with hardwood, tile or linoleum that are easier to keep dander free.
- Reduce indoor molds caused by high humidity by cleaning bathrooms, kitchens and basements regularly. A dehumidifier can be used to reduce molds, especially in damp, humid places like basements. Make sure the dehumidifier is cleaned often. To clean visible mold in the home, use detergent and a 5 percent bleach solution as directed.

Because many of the allergens that trigger eye allergies are airborne, avoidance is not always possible. You should discuss your eye allergy symptoms with an allergy specialist or your personal physician.