

For some people with very severe allergies, a treatment called immunotherapy may be recommended.

This involves being exposed to the allergen in a controlled way over a number of years, so your body gets used to it and doesn't react to it so severely.

What causes allergies?

Allergies occur when the body's immune system reacts to a particular substance as though it's harmful.

It's not clear why this happens, but most people affected have a family history of allergies or have closely related conditions such as asthma or eczema.

The number of people with allergies is increasing every year. The reasons for this are not understood, but one of the main theories is it's the result of living in a cleaner, germ-free environment, which reduces the number of germs our immune system has to deal with.

It's thought this may cause it to overreact when it comes into contact with harmless substances.

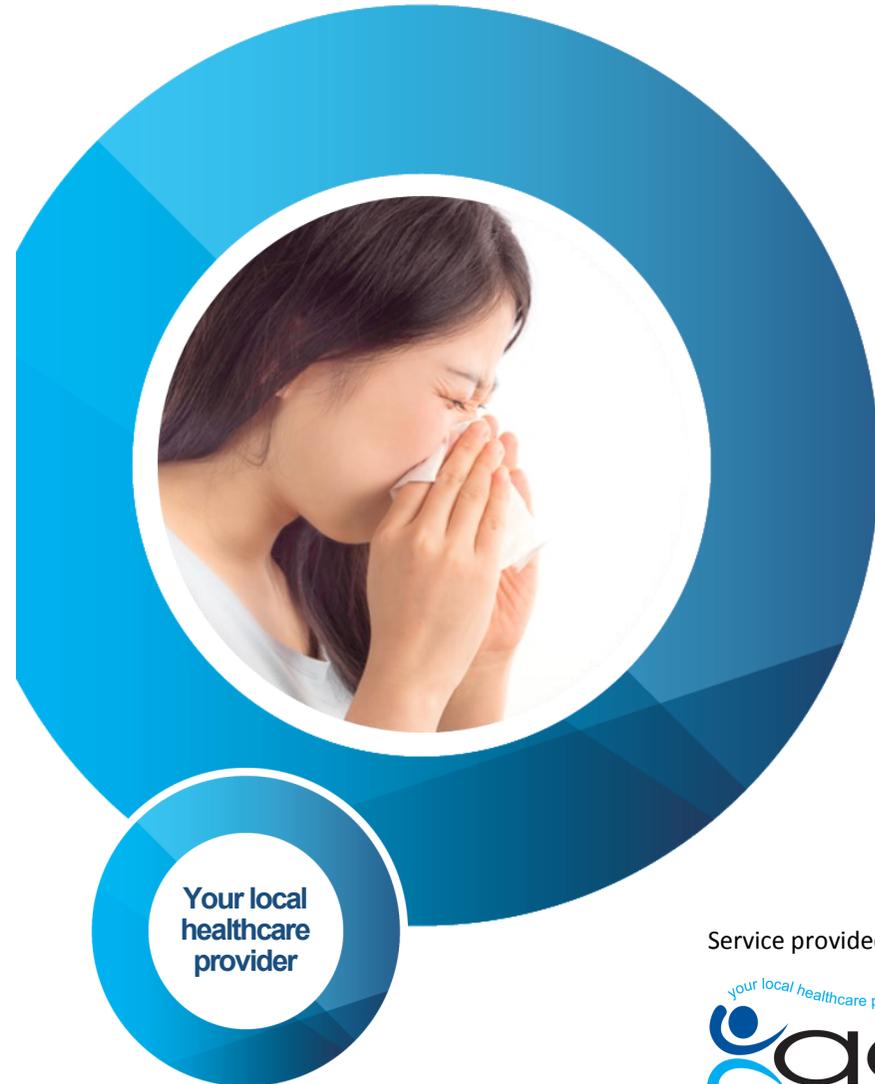
On request, this publication can be supplied in alternative formats including large print, Braille, audio tape and disk. We can also translate the Information into languages other than English. This publication is also available on our website.



www.acecic.co.uk

Allergies

Self Care Information



Service provided by:





An allergy is a reaction the body has to a particular food or substance.

Allergies are very common. They're thought to affect more than 1 in 4 people in the UK at some point in their lives. They are particularly common in children. Some allergies go away as a child gets older, although many are lifelong. Adults can develop allergies to things they weren't previously allergic to.

Having an allergy can be a nuisance and affect your everyday activities, but most allergic reactions are mild and can be largely kept under control. Severe reactions can occasionally occur, but these are uncommon.

Common allergies

Substances that cause allergic reactions are called allergens. The more common allergens include:

grass and tree pollen – an allergy to these is known as hay fever (allergic rhinitis)

- dust mites
- animal dander (tiny flakes of skin or hair)
- food – particularly nuts, fruit, shellfish, eggs and cow's milk
- insect bites and stings
- medication – including ibuprofen, aspirin, and certain antibiotics
- latex – used to make some gloves and condoms
- mould – these can release small particles into the air that you can breathe in
- household chemicals – including those in detergents and hair dyes

Most of these allergens are generally harmless to people who aren't allergic to them.

Symptoms of an allergic reaction

Allergic reactions usually happen quickly within a few minutes of exposure to an allergen.

They can cause:

- sneezing
- a runny or blocked nose
- red, itchy, watery eyes
- wheezing and coughing
- a red, itchy rash
- worsening of asthma or eczema symptoms

Most allergic reactions are mild, but occasionally a severe reaction called anaphylaxis or anaphylactic shock can occur. This is a medical emergency and needs urgent treatment.

Getting help for allergies

See your GP if you think you or your child might have had an allergic reaction to something.

The symptoms of an allergic reaction can also be caused by other conditions. Your GP can help determine whether it's likely you have an allergy.

If your GP thinks you might have a mild allergy, they can offer advice and treatment to help manage the condition.

If your allergy is particularly severe or it's not clear what you're allergic to, your GP may refer you to an allergy specialist for testing and advice about treatment.

How to manage an allergy

In many cases, the most effective way of managing an allergy is to avoid the allergen that causes the reaction whenever possible.

For example, if you have a food allergy, you should check a food's ingredients list for allergens before eating it. The Food Standards Agency has more information about food allergen labelling.

There are also several medications available to help control symptoms of allergic reactions, including:

- antihistamines – these can be taken when you notice the symptoms of a reaction, or before being exposed to an allergen to stop a reaction occurring
- decongestants – tablets, capsules, nasal sprays or liquids that can be used as a short-term treatment for a blocked nose
- lotions and creams, such as moisturising creams (emollients) – these can reduce skin redness and itchiness
- steroid medication – sprays, drops, creams, inhalers and tablets that can help reduce redness and swelling caused by an allergic reaction

