When Allergy Kills
Learn about symptoms, treatment and prevention of anaphylaxis

Scratch, Wheeze and Sneeze
Alert signs you should not dismiss

Be In Control
Keep allergies at bay

8 Truths about Allergies
Find out the truth about commonly heard allergy myths
Accidents occur when you least expect them. It is advisable to have a first aid kit that is equipped with essential items necessary to treat minor injuries in your home, office or car.

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Diagnosing multiple allergies can be a challenge as some people may dismiss your predicament as an exaggeration. Don’t let such opinions dissuade you from seeking proper treatment. Four experts look into the case of a patient suffering from multiple allergies and share their opinions with you.

No Child’s Play

Is your child sneezing, wheezing and/or scratching away due to an allergy? Learn what you can do for him.

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Allergic reactions can range from mild symptoms to serious consequences including death. Our expert speaks on the symptoms, treatment and prevention of anaphylaxis, a potentially life-threatening allergic reaction.

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Understanding myths can help protect your loved ones and yourself from allergies. Experts from Raffles explain the fallacy in these commonly heard myths.

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Now that you know you have an allergy, what should you do? Here are some practical steps you could take to keep allergies at bay.

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Chocolate allergies are very rare. Ms Elysia Chan shares her account of her allergy to chocolate.
New Doc on the Block

Dr Lim Kok Bin, Specialist in Urology, graduated from the National University of Singapore and obtained his postgraduate degree in the United Kingdom. He was a consultant in the Department of Urology and also the Director of Andrology Service at Singapore General Hospital. He spent a year as a clinical fellow at the University of Western Ontario, Canada under Professor Gerald Brock, and was awarded the Prize Essay in Clinical Research for his work on Peyronies disease.

Dr Lim has particular interest in prostate diseases, voiding dysfunction, male infertility and sexual dysfunction. He is trained in artificial urinary sphincter and penile prosthesis implantation, correction of penile curvature and various microsurgical procedures such as microsurgical ligation of varicocele and reanastomosis of previous vasectomy.

Dr Lim is trained in endourology. He performs a variety of minimally invasive surgeries for urinary stones and prostate diseases, including percutaneous nephrolithotripsy, rigid and flexible ureteroscopy and laser prostatectomy.

Laparoscopic (keyhole) Colectomy

Laparoscopic colorectal surgery, the gold standard for colorectal cancer surgery is now available in Raffles Hospital.

Colorectal cancer is the top cancer in Singapore, with 1,400 new cases diagnosed annually. Singapore, along with Australia, Japan and Taiwan, has one of the highest age-standardised rates of colorectal cancer in the world.

Surgery can be done either by the traditional open method or by laparoscopic or keyhole techniques. Cancer-related survival after laparoscopic colorectal surgery is equivalent to that after open surgery, provided it is performed by an experienced surgeon with strict adherence to well-defined principles of cancer resection.

According to Dr Wong Kutt Sing, Specialist in General Surgery at Raffles Hospital, whose specialty interest lies in laparoscopic (keyhole) colorectal surgery, this method has consistently shown to have several significant advantages when compared with open surgery. Its only disadvantage is a longer surgery time.

Mr Paul Heng who was diagnosed with third stage colorectal cancer was given the option to operate using laparoscopic colectomy. “I felt no anxiety before the surgery as I am very comfortable and confident of Dr Wong’s expertise and professionalism. The surgery was very successful and I was able to get off my bed after two days. It is unbelievable for such a major operation,” said Mr Heng.

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Oncologic Adequacy

Same

Cancer Survival

Same
Hair loss occurs in both men and women, but patterns differ between the genders. Hair restoration aims to permanently correct pattern baldness. Raffles now offers medical solutions and treatments to manage or even reverse hair loss. These treatments can range from oral or topical medications to hair transplantation.

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If you are suffering from hair loss, you should seek treatment early for best results. Speak to our doctors to know what options you have to help you cope with your condition.

For more information or an appointment, please contact Raffles Aesthetics at 6311 2340.

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Our Orchard Raffles Japanese Clinic has shifted from International Building to Wheelock Place.

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* This service is not applicable for acute cases. Clinic will deliver up to three months worth of medication only. Patients are still required to have a doctor’s review periodically. The doctor will assess the patient’s need based on his/her last visit, before approving a prescription for the repetition of the medication.

For more information, please call 6311 2222.

New Clinic

Raffles Medical opened a new clinic on 1 October 2009.

The new clinic is located at Sixth Avenue. It offers general family medicine services, including travel medicine, vaccination and insurance & statutory check-ups.

Sixth Avenue 10E, Sixth Avenue #01-03, Singapore 276474
Tel: 6462 3426   Fax: 6462 4563

Monday - Friday: 8.30am - 1.00pm, 2.00pm - 5.30pm, 6.30pm - 9.30pm
Saturday, Sunday & Public Holiday: 8.30am - 1.00pm
Did you know that an allergy is a disorder of the immune system? Allergic reactions occur when your immune system reacts to allergens, usually harmless environmental substances. These reactions are acquired, predictable and rapid.

Many allergens, such as dust or pollen, are airborne particles. In these cases, symptoms arise in areas that are in contact with the air, such as the skin, eyes, nose and lungs. Dr Wong Wei Mon, Senior Physician at Raffles Medical, shares with us the common sites where allergy symptoms manifest on our body.

**Allergic reaction in multiple sites:**

Some types of allergies produce multiple symptoms, and in rare cases, an allergic reaction can become very severe. This severe reaction is called anaphylaxis.

Signs of anaphylaxis include difficulty in breathing, difficulty in swallowing, swelling of the lips, tongue, and throat or other parts of the body, and dizziness or loss of consciousness.
**Nose and Airways**

Allergic reactions can be mild, as in the case of allergic rhinitis, where the symptoms are irritation of the nose, sneezing, blocked or runny nose.

Allergies can also play a major role in conditions such as asthma. Inhaled allergens can lead to asthmatic symptoms such as shortness of breath (dyspnoea), coughing and wheezing. This is due to the narrowing of the airways (bronchoconstriction) and the increased production of mucus in the lungs.

**Eyes**

The symptom of itching usually indicates an allergic reaction. This is true of allergic conjunctivitis, where the primary symptom is itching of the eye. In addition, you may also experience redness and tearing of the eyes, runny nose and blurred vision.

**Mouth**

Oral allergy syndrome (OAS) is a type of food allergy typified by a cluster of allergic reactions in the mouth in response to eating certain (usually fresh) fruits, nuts, and vegetables.

Allergic reactions in OAS sufferers usually occur very rapidly, within minutes of eating a trigger food. The most common reaction is an itching or burning sensation in the lips, mouth, and/or pharynx. Occasionally, there may be a swelling of the lips, tongue, and uvula and a sensation of tightness in the throat.

If a sufferer swallows the food and the allergen is not destroyed by the stomach acids, there is a good chance that there will be a reaction from histamine release later in the gastrointestinal tract. Vomiting, diarrhoea, severe indigestion, or cramps may then occur.

Once you’ve identified your potential OAS triggers, you’ll need to avoid them in their raw state. Often just peeling or cooking the food will reduce the effects. At times, an antihistamine can effectively relieve the symptoms.

**Skin**

Our skin is the largest organ in our body. Is there any surprise that this is a common site for allergy symptoms? Common skin allergy conditions include eczema and hives.

Eczema is a term used for a group of skin conditions having several things in common: dryness, itchiness, inflammation and thickening of skin, and recurrence. Scratching can actually trigger eczematous rashes. It is a vicious cycle as initial mild itching makes you want to scratch. However, scratching damages the skin, worsens inflammation, irritates surface nerves, and leads to an even more intense itch than what you had before.

Some cosmetics or laundry detergents can also make certain people break out in an itchy rash. If it happens to you, you may be allergic to the chemicals in these products. Dyes, household cleaners, and pesticides used on lawns or plants can also cause allergic reactions in some people.

**Digestive Tract**

Eosinophils are a subgroup of white blood cells which have a role in the protective immunity against certain parasites but also contribute to the inflammation that occurs in allergic disorders.

Eosinophilic disorder is a condition where there is high numbers of eosinophils as a result of inflammation of the digestive tract. The condition is caused by allergies to many foods and can be triggered or exacerbated by airborne allergies.

Eosinophilic gastroenteritis is often misdiagnosed as acid reflux or chronic heartburn because they have similar symptoms such as nausea, vomiting, stomach pain, choking, cramping, diarrhoea and weight loss.
Scratch, Wheeze and Sneezes

Alert signs that you should not dismiss

Some of us have allergies that are, despite some slight inconvenience and irritation, perfectly bearable. However, the less lucky ones seem destined to sneeze, itch, and struggle through life as they try to cope with their allergies and the onslaught of symptoms.

Diagnosing multiple allergies can be a challenge as some may be quick to dismiss your description as an exaggerated account of your predicament. We got four of our experts to look into the case of one patient who may be suffering from multiple allergies. Read on to find out what they have to say.
“It is very rare for me to get through a day without sneezing. On a bad day, I would sneeze so hard or so frequently that I would tear and end up having a headache.

I often find myself rubbing my eyes furiously as they are very itchy. Likewise, my skin itches badly at the end of the day. This is especially so after I take a bath and before I turn in for the night. I often scratch myself till I bleed and my legs are covered with scars as a result.

Are these symptoms related to one another? Will my condition worsen if I do not do anything about them?”

- Anonymous

From the description of your symptoms, it is very likely that you are suffering from allergic reactions. This is commonly due to reactions to inhalants such as dust mites, pollen, fungus and animal dander. It could also be triggered by food reactions. The headaches, eye reactions and skin itchiness can all be accounted for by the diagnosis of allergy.

Dr Stephen Lee, Specialist in ENT Surgery, Raffles ENT Centre

It would appear that you have both allergic conjunctivitis as well as nasal allergies. Allergies mean that your body reacts to inhalants or foods or both, triggering the symptoms of itch, runny nose and sneezing.

Dr Lee Jong Jian, Specialist in Ophthalmology, Raffles Eye Centre

It is possible that you are also suffering from some form of chronic urticaria or dermatitis. Quite often, either of these conditions will occur together with eye and nose complaints. When left untreated, patients will scratch uncontrollably because the itch is often unbearable and agonising. The scratching often makes the skin condition worse and leaves a lot of scars.

A/Prof Wong Soon Tee, Specialist in Dermatology, Raffles Skin Centre

As mentioned by the other specialists, we cannot rule out the possibility of a food allergy. Food allergy occurs when the immune system mistakenly attacks a food protein. Ingestion of the offending food may trigger the sudden release of chemicals, including histamine, resulting in symptoms of an allergic reaction.

Ms Nehal Kamdar, Senior Dietitian, Raffles Internal Medicine Centre
Alert signs: Sneezing everyday and having a headache as a result

Allergic reactions to atmospheric particles and certain food items are common culprits of certain distressing symptoms. These symptoms include headaches, facial pains, coughs, and runny or blocked nose incidences.

"In the case presented earlier, allergic reaction is the most likely diagnosis for the sneezing symptoms. The headache experienced could also be due to the allergy or it could be due to blockage or infection of the sinus or a combination of both conditions," said Dr Stephen Lee.

Allergies are abnormal immune system reactions to things that are typically harmless to most people. When you’re allergic to something, your immune system mistakenly believes that this substance is harmful to your body.

In an attempt to protect the body, the immune system produces IgE antibodies to that allergen. Those antibodies then cause certain cells in the body to release chemicals into the bloodstream, one of which is histamine. The histamine acts on the eyes, nose, throat, lungs, skin, or gastrointestinal tract and causes the symptoms of the allergic reaction. Future exposure to that same allergen will trigger this antibody response again. This means that every time you come into contact with that allergen, you’ll have an allergic reaction.

Allergies can trigger symptoms which are very similar to those of a common cold. How can you tell the difference?

"Itchiness, such as a scratchy nose and throat and watery eyes, is the key to distinguish colds from allergies. You can learn to recognise the different patterns of symptoms by being more observant. Colds come on suddenly and can last up to 10 days, while allergies can last up to several weeks," said Dr Lee.

Don’t sneeze at allergy relief

Dr Lee added that individuals who have suffered from nasal allergies for years often develop blockage of their sinuses or sinus infections, and this development will result in worsening of the symptoms. Significant nasal block would cause airway obstruction when you sleep and this condition is called obstructive sleep apnea. You may end up feeling tired and sleepy in the morning despite having a proper night’s sleep.

Optimal control of your condition would require attention to treating your allergies and also assessing for sinus obstruction. You may control your allergies with a variety of anti-allergy medications. This would include oral anti allergy medication and/or topical steroid spray and they are purely for symptom control.

It would be best to identify the inhalants or foods triggering the allergy, and subsequently avoid or minimise contact with these triggers to control the root cause of the allergy. An ENT doctor would be able to assess for sinus obstruction, and if indicated, advise appropriate treatment to correct the obstruction.
Up to 50 million Americans suffer from allergies, with allergic reactions involving the eyes being a common complaint. An allergic reaction that affects the conjunctiva, a clear layer of transparent lining overlying the eyes, is commonly known as allergic conjunctivitis.

“As the conjunctiva and the inner lining of the nose are similar, the same allergens can trigger the same allergic response in both areas,” said Dr Lee Jong Jian.

In addition to itching of the eyes and tearing, you may also experience the following symptoms:

- Redness
- Burning sensation
- Blurred vision
- Mucous production

**Alert signs:** Itching and regular tearing of the eyes

Taking a closer look at **eye allergies**

“Allergic conjunctivitis can be associated with eczema, allergic rhinitis and asthma. Diagnosis of allergic conjunctivitis generally is made by taking a thorough history and by careful clinical observation,” said Dr Lee.

Dr Lee added that patients with such conditions are often not suitable for contact lens wear as it can aggravate the inflammation. If left untreated, chronic allergic eye conditions can result in complications to the cornea and the external eye surface and may affect your vision.

Therefore, you may want to consider seeing an ophthalmologist for your ocular allergies. Your eyes would also be examined to help rule out other problems.

There are many ways of treating allergic conjunctivitis, depending on the severity of the condition. Treatment ranges from anti-histamine eye drops to corticosteroid eye drops. Eye lubricants are usually helpful too. Excessive rubbing can aggravate the condition and may cause other problems to the eye and surrounding tissues.

As avoidance of the allergen(s) is not always easy or possible, here are some home treatments that may provide you with some relief from your ocular allergies:

- Apply cold compresses to your eyes to help reduce the allergic reaction
- Use lubricating eye drops as needed to help flush out allergens that got into your eyes
- Use over-the-counter medications, such as allergy eye drops and oral antihistamines, as directed for mild allergies
Let’s not rush to rash conclusions

A/Prof Wong says that accurate diagnosis is the most important step for successful treatment. Generally, treatment options for the above skin allergies will include anti-histamine, cytokine blockers, anti-inflammatory steroid creams, antibiotics, emollients and immunosuppresants.

If you are not sure what you are allergic to, consider getting a skin prick test to find out the culprit.

Your doctor would usually perform the test on your forearm. Here’s how it works: A tiny amount of allergen is placed on your skin. The spot is then scratched or pricked slightly so that the allergen can get under your skin. After 15 to 20 minutes, we will be able to deduce that you are allergic to the particular allergen if there’s a bump or itchiness on that spot.

The skin prick test is the current gold standard for confirming allergies and it has a strong history of being valid, reproducible and easy. “It’s virtually painless and it’s a very safe test. Even kids that are as young as one-year-old can undergo the test,” said A/Prof Wong.

Some of the more common substances that your doctor will check for in an allergy skin test include:

- Dust mites and tiny bugs that can’t be seen with the naked eye
- Proteins from pets, including dander and fur
- Moulds
- Tree, grass, and weed pollens
- Cow’s milk, soya, egg, wheat, shell fish

**Alert signs:** Itching and scars on the skin as a result of vigorous scratching

Dermatitis and chronic urticaria are two types of skin allergies that often occur together with eye and nose complaints.

Dermatitis is a general term that describes an inflammation of the skin. There are different types of dermatitis, including seborrhoeic dermatitis and atopic dermatitis (eczema). Though the disorder can have many causes and occurs in many forms, it usually involves swollen, reddened and itchy skin.

“Dermatitis is a common condition that isn’t life-threatening or contagious,” said A/Prof Wong Soon Teo. However, you may want to consult a dermatologist if:

- You are so uncomfortable that you are losing sleep or are distracted from your daily routines
- Your skin becomes painful
- You suspect your skin is infected

Urticaria or hives, on the other hand, is an itchy rash caused by tiny amounts of fluid that leak from blood vessels just under the skin surface. Urticaria is classified as:

- **Acute urticaria** if it develops suddenly and lasts less than six weeks. Most cases last 24-48 hours. About one in six people will have at least one bout of urticaria in their life. Some people have recurring bouts of acute urticaria.

- **Chronic urticaria** if it persists long-term. In chronic urticaria a rash develops on most days for at least six weeks. About one in 1000 people develop chronic urticaria at some stage in their life. Women are twice as likely to suffer from this than men. Some people have an urticarial rash ‘on and off’ for months, or even years.

The rash from chronic urticaria is usually itchy and it can affect any area of skin. Small raised areas called weals develop on the skin. The weals are commonly one to two cm across but can vary in size. There may be just a few but sometimes many develop over various parts of the body. Weals that are next to each other can join together to form larger ones. The weals can be any shape but are often circular.

As a weal fades, the surrounding flare remains for a while. This makes the affected area of skin look blotchy and red. The bloch of a weal fades gradually and the skin returns to normal. Each weal usually lasts less than 24 hours. However, as some fade away, others may appear. It may seem as if the rash is moving around the body. The rash may clear completely only to return a few hours or days later.

“As the rash may constantly come and go, the ongoing itch can cause distress and difficulty in sleeping for some. Bouts of angio-oedema, which occur in about half of the people with chronic urticaria, can sometimes cause serious breathing difficulties,” said A/Prof Wong.

Besides dermatitis or chronic urticaria, scabies, xerosis, lichen planus and candidiasis are the other common skin conditions that cause extreme itch on the skin.
Food allergy occurs when the immune system mistakenly attacks a food protein. Ingestion of the offending food may trigger the sudden release of chemicals, including histamine, resulting in symptoms of an allergic reaction.

The symptoms may be mild (rashes, hives, itching, swelling, etc.) or severe (trouble breathing, wheezing, loss of consciousness, etc). Symptoms typically appear within minutes to two hours after the person has eaten the food to which he or she is allergic. They tend to be persistent and consistent each time that food is ingested. As a result, food allergy is usually self-diagnosed.

However, do not take food allergy lightly. According to Ms Nehal Kamdar, a food allergy is potentially life-threatening. Tree nuts and peanuts are the leading causes of deadly allergic reactions called anaphylaxis.

Your doctor may order a food allergy test if he feels the symptoms are due to an allergic reaction to food. If the test result is positive to food allergies, the patient would then be referred to the dietitian.

“The dietitian’s role is to counsel the patient on avoidance of foods that may contain the allergen. Common food allergens are milk, soy, egg, wheat, peanuts, other nuts like walnuts, cashew nut, fish and shellfish,” said Ms Kamdar.

Alert signs: All of the above

Don’t be consumed by FOOD allergies

There are a number of reactions to food that cause similar symptoms to a food allergy. If you have only digestive symptoms, chances are it’s not a true food allergy, but food intolerance.

Depending on the type of food intolerance you have, you may be able to eat small amounts of problem foods without a reaction. By contrast, if you have a true food allergy, even a tiny amount of food may trigger an allergic reaction. As food intolerance may involve some of the same signs and symptoms as a food allergy does - such as nausea, vomiting, cramping and diarrhoea - people often confuse the two.

The risk factors for food allergy include:

• **Family history**
  You’re at increased risk of food allergies if asthma, eczema, hives or allergies are common in your family.

• **Other allergies**
  If you’re already allergic to one food, you may be at increased risk of becoming allergic to another. Likewise, having another type of allergy increases your risk of having a food allergy.

• **Age**
  Food allergies are most common in children, especially toddlers and infants. As you grow older, your digestive system matures and your body is less likely to absorb food or food components that trigger allergies. Fortunately, children typically outgrow allergies to milk, soy, wheat and eggs. Severe allergies and allergies to nuts and shellfish are more likely to be lifelong.

• **A past food allergy**
  Children may outgrow a food allergy, but in some cases it returns later in life.

If you are found to be truly allergic to any particular food, strict avoidance of the allergy-causing food is the only way to avoid a reaction. Ms Kamdar says that reading ingredient labels for all foods is the key to avoiding a reaction. If a product doesn’t have a label, individuals with a food allergy should not eat that food.
Seeing a young child sneezing, wheezing and or scratching away due to an allergy always pains the heart, especially that of the parents.

Unfortunately, the number of allergies in children appeared to have increased over the past decades. For Dr Tan Mein Chuen, Specialist in Paediatrics, Raffles Children’s Centre, children as young as six months old with asthma, rhinitis and eczema have seen him for their allergies.
About Allergies

Allergies are not uncommon. They can develop even in infants, manifesting itself in forms such as blocked nose, cough, rash, or diarrhoea after exposure to the allergen. It can affect anybody and at any age. One can be allergic to anything, including medications, the sun, cold weather and all kinds of foods.

Where Do Allergies Come From

Unfortunately, allergy is a case of nature and nurture. If your child develops allergies, it could be caused by a combination of the genes he or she inherited from you and your spouse, as well as their environmental exposures. If one parent has a history of allergies, your child has 40 per cent chance of developing allergies. If both parents have allergies, the risk increases to 80 per cent. The exact genes that account for allergies have not been fully identified.

What Can Parents Do

As concerned parents, we all want the best for our children. Some studies have shown that certain measures can help reduce the onset of allergic symptoms in children. Exclusive breast feeding for up to four months would reduce the risk of eczema and asthma in high risk infants. Weaning after seven months may ironically increase the risk of allergies. The use of probiotics may reduce the risk of allergies.

What is confusing is that the relationship between allergic sensitisation and disease is bell shaped. High levels of exposure may result in tolerance whereas moderate levels are associated with the highest risk.

One of the commonest allergen in children with allergic rhinitis is house dust mites.

“You can consider getting your child to do a skin prick test to determine the allergen that is affecting your child,” advised Dr Tan. “With that information at hand, you would be better equipped to control your child’s allergy through careful avoidance of the allergen.”

Here are some things you could do at home easily to help your child reduce another allergy attack, especially if they are allergic to house dust mites:

- Avoid carpets in the house
- Shield your beddings with covers when not in use
- Wash your linens with hot water (>60°C) regularly
- Avoid allergens and allergy triggers including perfume, colognes and cigarette smoke

Allergy Checklist

Answer these questions to find out if your child is allergic.

1. Is your child suffering from what appears to be frequent colds which may resolve in the afternoon only to recur at night.
2. Is your child experiencing cough, nasal congestion, runny nose, grunting noises, fatigue, headache, irritability, restlessness, frustration, or insomnia on a regular basis?
3. Does your child rub his/her eyes/nose?
4. Is your child suffering from eczema?
5. Does your child breathe through his/her mouth?

Yes
If you have been found to be allergic to insect bites/stings, food or medications, you may be at risk of anaphylaxis. Exposure to the offending allergen, be it the venom from a bee sting or a small peanut, can lead to anaphylaxis within minutes.

According to Dr Gabriel Cheong, Senior Physician at the Emergency Department of Raffles Hospital, anaphylaxis requires an immediate trip to the doctor’s clinic as it can lead to unconsciousness or even death if treatment is not promptly administered.

Symptoms of anaphylaxis may include:

- Skin reactions including hives and itching, flushed or pale skin
- Constricted airways and a swollen tongue or throat, causing wheezing and trouble breathing
- A weak and rapid pulse
- Nausea, vomiting or diarrhoea
- Dizziness or fainting, loss of consciousness

Understanding Allergy

Our immune system produces antibodies to defend us against foreign substances. “This is important to defend against harmful organisms,” says Dr Cheong. “But some people’s immune systems overreact to substances that do not usually cause an immune reaction in the first place. When this occurs, our immune system sets off a chemical chain reaction, leading to allergy symptoms. For most people, allergy symptoms are not life-threatening. But in some people this reaction leads to anaphylaxis.”

Thankfully, anaphylaxis is not common, though those with a history of allergies or asthma are at higher risk. This is especially so for those who had a serious allergic reaction or an anaphylactic reaction before.

Doctor, I’ve a severe allergic reaction!

During a life threaten anaphylactic attack, you should seek emergency medical help right away as your airway may become obstructed, leading to respiratory and cardiac failure. You will require immediate emergency treatment. If the person having the attack carries an epinephrine auto-injector, you should administer the shot right away. However, even if symptoms improve after the injection, a visit to the emergency department is still necessary as symptoms may recur.

If you had a severe allergy attack or any signs and symptoms of anaphylaxis before, you should make an appointment to see your doctor to properly evaluate, diagnose and manage it. Future reactions may be more severe than the first.

Treatment

Medications that are helpful in treating an anaphylaxis attack include:

- Epinephrine (adrenaline)
- Oxygen
- Injected antihistamines and steroids
- A beta agonist (such as albuterol)
- Oral steroid medications

You can consider immunotherapy, a long-term treatment, if your anaphylactic reaction is triggered by insect stings. In immunotherapy, low doses of the offending allergen are injected into your body over time to reduce its allergic response and prevent a severe reaction in the future.

Unfortunately, in most other cases there is no way to treat the underlying
During anaphylaxis, your immune system releases a flood of chemicals causing you to go into shock. Your blood pressure drops suddenly while your airways narrow, blocking normal breathing. Common triggers of anaphylaxis include certain foods and medications, insect venom and latex.

Prevention

Dr Cheong recommends some simple steps you can take to prevent anaphylaxis - by avoiding the substances that cause the reaction:

- Indicate you have an allergy to specific drugs or substances by putting on a medical alert necklace or bracelet.
- Have an emergency kit with prescribed medications available. Your doctor can advise you on the appropriate contents. This may include an epinephrine auto-injector. Make sure your auto-injector has not expired.
- If you’re allergic to stinging insects, exercise caution when they’re nearby. Wear long-sleeved shirts and trousers. Avoid bright colours and don’t wear perfumes or colognes. Stay calm, move away slowly and avoid slapping at the insect.
- Avoid wearing sandals or walking barefoot in the grass if you’re allergic to insect stings.
- If you have specific food allergies, carefully read the labels of all the foods you buy. Manufacturing processes can change, so it’s important to periodically recheck the labels of foods you commonly eat. When eating out, ask about ingredients in the food, and ask about food preparation because even small amounts of the food you’re allergic to can cause a serious reaction.

If you observe someone having an allergic reaction with signs of anaphylaxis:

1. Call 995 or 6311 1555 for Raffles Hospital’s emergency hotline.
2. Check if the person is carrying any special medication to treat an allergic attack, such as an auto-injector of epinephrine. Administer the drug as directed - usually by pressing the auto-injector against the person’s thigh and holding it in place for several seconds. Massage the injection site for 10 seconds to enhance absorption. After administering epinephrine, have the person take an antihistamine pill if he/she is able to do so without choking. Look for a medical emergency ID bracelet or necklace.
3. The person should be lying on his/her back with the feet higher than the head.
4. Loosen any tight clothing and cover the person with a blanket. Don’t give him/her anything else to drink.
5. If there’s vomiting or bleeding from the mouth, turn the person on his/her side to prevent choking.
6. If there are no signs of circulation (i.e. breathing, coughing or movement), begin CPR.
From nursing duties to overseeing the clinic’s operations, Nurse Coordinator Ms Lim Hwa Hiang of Raffles ENT Centre is often found going the extra mile for her patients. However, grateful patients should remember not to give her chocolates, as she’s allergic to them. She speaks to UpClose on her work, her life and her allergies.
When did you decide to join Raffles Hospital?

After taking some time off from my career to care for my child, I rejoined the healthcare workforce in 2005. After the second interview, I set my mind to join Raffles Hospital because of its emphasis on patient service and care. From the moment I stepped into the building, I liked the overall environment and image of the place. I knew I would love to work here and be a part of an organisation that puts patient care first.

What's a typical day for you like?

I'm kept really busy as I help to supervise the clinic’s day-to-day operations. These range from making sure everything runs and works well, to preparing the doctors’ rooms, and making sure all the necessary equipment - as ENT is very much instrument based - are ready.

I attend to patients to make their clinic visits as fuss free as possible. For those who require surgery, I spend extra time answering their concerns. Furthermore, I have to reply to patients and potential patients’ enquiries, through the phone and email.

In addition, I work closely with the centre manager, and sometimes get roped into various hospital committees such as the Infection Control Committee. I coordinate meetings between doctors, hospital management and vendors of pharmaceutical and instrument companies.

You have a busy schedule! How do you manage your work-life balance?

That's the difficult part. My daughter wants me to spend more time with her but there are always urgent things that need to be completed before I can head home. Thankfully, I have a team of great colleagues and they help me out when I am in need. Without support from understanding family members and diligent colleagues, my job will not be easily accomplished.

What training do you need to undergo to be a staff nurse and nurse coordinator?

To work as a staff nurse, you need to undergo three years in nursing school (Diploma in Nursing) and that is just the beginning! There is a lot of learning on the job required for a nurse coordinator.

Experience in the field definitely helps. My Bachelor Degree in Nursing also helps me better manage care for my patients. I enjoy reading management books as I get to apply the principles in my work.

Having to attend to people day in and out, it is important to have loads of patience, an ability to empathise and to have great people skills.

What do you enjoy most about your work?

There’s never a dull moment! I’m always meeting new people with different needs and it is extremely gratifying to help patients resolve their problems. In some instances, our patients even become our ardent supporters; they keep coming back to the hospital and recommend their family and friends to us.

Are there any fulfilling moments in your work to share with us?

Some of the most fulfilling and touching moments arise unexpectedly when I make a difference in people’s lives by rendering assistance to suffering patients.

A patient once came with his hand covering his left ear. He was in great pain. After enquiring on the cost for treatment, he told me that he could only afford the consultation fee. I empathised with him and knew I had to do something to help him. I decided right away to treat the patient first and settle the payment later.

After explaining the situation to my specialist, he immediately agreed to see the patient. The patient felt much better after the consultation and treatment. When the patient left the room, my specialist told me to collect whatever amount the patient could afford.

I felt very happy to be working with such a supportive specialist and was delighted for the patient. When I told the patient about the doctor’s decision, he was very touched. He was very thankful to the doctor for helping him and thanked me profusely for my help. It felt good that I was able to help alleviate his suffering with the support and understanding of my doctors and fellow colleagues.

As a healthcare worker, do you have any tips on how to keep fit and stay healthy?

I play tennis and go to the gym regularly. I also watch my diet and take vitamin C supplements every day.

Can you share one little known fact about the lives of outpatient nurses?

We need to be able to think on our feet and to multi-task at all times. We are on our feet all day, and that can be tiring, but we really feel it is worth it when someone takes the effort to recognise a job well done.

There is a misconception that outpatient nurses have an easier life because we have regular working hours and generally deal with healthier ambulatory patients. This is not always true because we also have to manage patients who want immediate attention from the moment they step in. We are constantly challenged to strike a balance between patients’ expectations and the operational needs of a busy clinic.

We are discussing about allergy in this issue of Health News. As nurse in ENT Centre, do you have a memorable allergy case that you could share with us?

There was a patient who complained of having constant headache for more than half a year. We suspected that she could have a food allergy and did some tests on her. The test results indicated that she was allergic to asparagus, banana and whey! Following our advice to avoid these foods, she saw the last of her headaches.

Being allergic to chocolates yourself, do you have any advice for patients with allergy?

Know what triggers your symptoms, and stay away from them. Short of testing, careful observations can help to identify the allergen.

HN
Skin Prick Test
The economical skin prick test can determine your degree of sensitivity to various allergens such as pollens and foods. In this test, a small needle is used to gently prick the skin through a drop of fluid containing a known allergen. It is usually done on the forearm. The test is not painful and results are immediately available.

Skin Patch Test
Patch testing is a way of identifying whether a substance that comes in contact with the skin is causing inflammation of the skin (i.e. contact dermatitis). The test involves the application of various test substances to the skin under adhesive tape that is then left in place for 48 to 72 hours. The skin is examined later for response.

Raffles Hospital offers both Skin Prick and Skin Patch tests customised to your needs. Our specialist will discuss with you and prescribe the appropriate allergen tests.

For more information, please call 6311 2055 or email skincentre@raffleshospital.com
Operating hours (Monday - Friday: 8.30am - 6.00pm, Saturday: 8.30am - 1.00pm)
Allergies can have severe consequences. Understanding these commonly heard myths can help defend you and your loved ones from allergies. Experts from Raffles explain the fallacy in these myths. **Get it right today!**
Keeping short haired pets won’t cause allergies.

Pets, whether furry or non-furry, short haired or long haired, all have the propensity to cause allergies in those who are susceptible. The culprit in pet allergies is the protein that is found on the hair or in the saliva of pets such as cats and dogs.

Cats often cause more allergy problems than dogs because they tend to lick their fur a lot, spreading saliva protein onto their coats. These proteins can trigger an allergic reaction within minutes if breathed in by the allergy-sufferer.

The symptoms may include itchy eyes, sneezing, asthma and skin rashes.

Dr Chris Foo, Specialist in Dermatology, Raffles Skin Centre

We are safe from hay fever since we are not exposed to hay.

Hay fever is a misnomer on two counts. It is neither caused by hay nor is there associated fever. It is caused by allergy to pollens dispersed by the seasonal flowering plants usually in spring time giving rise to nasal congestion, blocked and running nose, breathlessness, general feeling of unwell and possibly secondary sinusitis. This 'flowering' season coincides with the 'haying' season, hence the “guilty by association” factor comes into play.

Dr Aw Chong Yin, Specialist in ENT Surgery, Raffles ENT Centre

Food allergies are the most common type of allergies.

Food allergy is a difficult problem because it is actually a group of diseases. Public perception of food allergy is very different from doctors’. Too many diseases are being blamed on food allergy and too many people, especially children are labelled as being “food allergic”. Food allergy is perceived to be present in 20 per cent of adults when the true figure is closer to one to two per cent. Through questionnaire surveys, prevalence of food allergy has been reported to range from 5 per cent in Singapore to 12 per cent in Japan. However, when doctor's assessment is included in an Israel prevalence study, the prevalence was only 1.7 per cent. Therefore, food allergy is not as common as people think it is.

A/P Wong Soon Tee, Specialist in Dermatology, Raffles Skin Centre

If a food gives me problems, I’m allergic to it.

The short answer would be ‘maybe’. It all depends on the problems you think the food is giving you. The classic immediate type of allergic reactions includes symptoms that can develop within seconds or minutes, for e.g. angioedema, urticaria, hives, and anaphylaxis. Some of these symptoms are severe and can be life threatening, requiring immediate medical attention. If you suspect that there is a food group that causes you these symptoms, you should consult your doctor who can suggest some tests to confirm this.

It is important to remember that there are other medical conditions that can also make you feel unwell. It is therefore important that you consult your family physician for him to find out the cause of the problem. It may involve blood tests to rule out conditions like diabetes, anaemia, thyroid disease. A food allergy test may also be required.

Dr Melvyn Wong, Senior Family Physician, Raffles Medical
5 Natural/organic foods are non-allergenic.
Limiting your diet to organic food is no guarantee that you will avoid triggering food allergies. In fact, some of the most allergenic foods are “natural”, unprocessed foods: cow’s milk, eggs, peanuts, wheat, soybeans, fish and shellfish, and nuts. These foods, together, account for close to 90 per cent of all food allergic reactions. The proteins in the food, and not the chemicals related to growing the food, are the cause of allergies.

Ms Nehal Kamdar, Senior Dietitian, Raffles Internal Medicine Centre

6 Allergies are psychosomatic.
Although stress can influence, heighten or worsen allergies, the causal relationship is not so straightforward. More research needs to unravel the exact mechanisms as many people do not develop allergies with stress. Researchers are still trying to pinpoint stress-related factors which may influence our immune system and also clarify protective factors. We can then fine-tune lifestyle modification to help allergy sufferers and hopefully prevent children and vulnerable adults from developing certain allergies later on.

Meanwhile, it’s best to take good care of your physical and mental health, manage stress, and avoid potential allergens and addictive substances (e.g. smoking, drugs, and excessive alcohol) and high-risk behaviours. You should also see your doctor early for help in any of these areas.

Dr Arthur Lee, Specialist in Psychiatry, Raffles Counselling Centre

7 I should save my prescription allergy medication for the days I am suffering most.
Anti-allergy medications work best when taken according to the treatment plan your doctor has given you. This is especially true for prescribed nasal steroid sprays and anti-histamines, which may become ineffective if only taken on “as needed” basis. Usually nasal steroid sprays work best after two to three weeks of continuous therapy, and you may need to continue this for an extended period for maximal benefit. The dose of anti-histamine tablets and nasal sprays may be tailored down gradually once symptoms become more manageable. Hence it is not advisable to take these medicines only when needed, but to follow the directions given by your doctor regarding therapeutic doses and frequency.

Dr Rupert See, Senior Physician, Raffles Medical

8 Allergy shots don’t work.
Allergy shots also commonly known as immunotherapy injections have been very popular in the United States for the last 50 years. Immunotherapy is used to decrease the body’s response to allergens such as dust mite, tree and grass pollens. There is enough evidence to support the fact that it is effective. However, up till recently, it could only be administered via injections on a regular basis. Technology has since advanced such that allergen immunotherapy can now be effectively given via placing drops under the tongue on a regular basis without the need for injections. This is called sublingual immunotherapy. Instead of calling it allergy shots, perhaps a more appropriate name might be allergy drops!

Dr Stephen Lee, Specialist in ENT Surgery, Raffles ENT Centre
Allergy-proof your home

Does the frequency of your sneezing increase when you are in an air-conditioned room? “As you may be sensitive to the cold temperature or even the dust or moulds from the air-con vents, try to avoid sleeping in an air-conditioned room to help alleviate your symptoms,” says Dr Bina Kurup, Consultant Family Physician at Raffles Medical.

As dust and dust mites are often common culprits of allergies, minimising exposure to them could be helpful. This can be done through the following measures:

- Vacuuming the room and wet-wiping surfaces regularly
- Avoiding carpets and heavy drapes
- Changing feather pillows to the foam variety
- Washing bedclothes twice weekly
- Using dust-proof cover over mattress and pillows

In addition, allergy-proof the different parts of your home with these simple steps from Dr Stephen Lee, Specialist in ENT Surgery of Raffles ENT Centre.

Living Room

- If you are allergic to animal dander, you should avoid having pets at home.
- Look out for old mouldy shoes as they could give rise to fungus allergic disease.
- Store newspapers and old books properly so that they do not end up collecting dust.

Bedroom

- Every six to 12 months, sun the mattress and beddings. This will help control dust and dust mite allergies.
- Avoid stuffed toys, as their fur tends to collect dust.
- Get your air-condition serviced at regular intervals thrice a year.

Fight food allergies with knowledge and information

If you have a food allergy, you will have to cautiously avoid any food that could trigger it. This means that you need to be very clear about every ingredient that goes into your food. Senior Dietitian at Raffles Hospital, Ms Nehal Kamdar, shares the following tips with us.
Be in Control
Keep Allergies At Bay

Now that you know that you have an allergy, what should you do next? First and foremost, avoid the things that you are allergic to. While that sounds like common sense, trying to put it into practice in your everyday life is not always realistic.

Our experts share some practical steps that you could take to keep your allergies at bay.

**Always read food labels on manufactured foods**
- Reading food labels helps you identify ingredients that you are allergic to.
- Food labels are required to list clearly common food allergens. Read them carefully to avoid these top eight sources of food allergens: milk, eggs, peanuts, tree nuts, fish, shellfish, soy and wheat.
- If you have asthma, be sure to ask if sulfites have been added to foods when dining in restaurants. When shopping for foods, check labels for the terms "sodium bisulfite", "potassium bisulfite", "sodium sulfite", "sulfur dioxide" and "potassium metabisulfite". Avoid buying food that contains these ingredients.

**Make your needs known to others**
- When eating out, ensure that your server is aware that you cannot eat the food that you are allergic to, and that you need to be 100 per cent certain that the meal you order does not contain it.
- Be aware of the possibility of cross-contamination between foods in the kitchen. Your server should make sure that your meal was not prepared on surfaces or in pans that contained any of the food that you are allergic to.

**TCM Remedies**

Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) has been used to treat allergies for hundreds of years. Ms Miao Meng, TCM physician at Raffles Chinese Medicine Centre, shares with us tips to manage allergy symptoms.

1. **Control your diet**
   - According to the principles of TCM, sweets, dairy products and cold foods tend to increase mucus buildup. This put ice cream and yogurt at the top of the list of foods to avoid during the allergy season.
   - You should eat more foods that are considered easily digestible, such as soups, salads, vegetables and boiled grains. When your digestion is efficient, there will be less tendency for mucus to build up in your body.

2. **Seek TCM treatment**
   - Both acupuncture and Chinese herbal medicine have been shown to help people with allergic conditions such as rhinitis, asthma and eczema.
   - Acupuncture frequently relieves allergy symptoms immediately. For example, manipulation of points around the nose and large intestine usually relieves nasal congestion and sneezing as soon as the needles are inserted.
As a child, Ms Elysia Chan loved her chocolates and could easily devour a bag of her favourite chocolates in minutes. However, each time she gave in to that sweet tooth of hers, Elysia would find herself suffering for the ensuing days to come. She would be feverish, her throat would swell and she would find it difficult to breathe. Until she sees her family doctor, that is.

"I think my family doctor loves me," says Elysia. "At the peak of my condition, I would visit him once every fortnight due to yet another allergic reaction."

Her allergy affected her lifestyle as she was often unwell and had to excuse herself from school and other sports activities. She also became familiar with medications, "I recall mostly being prescribed antibiotics as my throat looked really bad, so much so that I couldn’t swallow. Over the years, my doctor had to prescribe stronger antibiotics."

At 14 years old, Elysia removed her tonsils as her doctor found them to be abnormally large in size.

Soon enough, she put two and two together and found that her love for chocolates was probably the cause of her discomfort.

"I always knew, since I was about six years old, that I would get a negative reaction whenever I took chocolates, but it just hadn’t occurred to me I was "allergic". I finally decided to avoid it altogether as it’s just not worth the ‘suffering,” she shared candidly.

True enough, her symptoms were relieved during the periods when she could bring herself to go without chocolates.

Nowadays, to reduce possible allergy occurrences, Elysia reads the labels of every food she buys and take extra caution especially when she dines out. However, there were also occasions where Elysia let her guard down and suffered for it.

"I once ordered a cheese cake and it came with some suspicious-looking brown specks. The waiter insisted it wasn’t chocolate. Well, it was, and I knew it soon after I devoured it. I had to take medical leave the next day thanks to that cake."

You can call it her ‘just desserts’ for throwing caution to the wind.

"It’s not an easy route - avoiding chocolates. It’s extremely tempting when I see people around me tucking in to delicious chocolate desserts (think brownies and molten chocolate cake!)."

she said wistfully, “Still, I’m thankful I’m only mildly allergic to chocolates. It could have been worse.”

Chocolate Allergy

True cocoa allergy is extremely rare as few people are really allergic to chocolate. More often than not, reactions to chocolate are the result of a food intolerance or allergy to an ingredient in chocolate. People may be allergic to one or more food additives used in some chocolate products. Common food allergy triggers in chocolate products include cow’s milk, nuts, wheat or gluten, soy and corn.

Reactions to chocolates can include headache, heartburn, rectal itching, hives, confusion, and breathing problems. In severe cases, anaphylaxis (an allergic reaction involving two or more body systems that can lead to a potentially life-threatening shock) may result.
Nutritional Supplements for Allergies

Allergies happen when the immune system attacks a harmless substance. During an allergy, the immune system responds to a perceived threat – the allergen.

Allergies affect one’s quality of life and productivity at work or home. Emotional factors such as stress and anger may aggravate allergies, especially if the immune system is not functioning properly. The following is a suggested list of nutritional supplements that may be helpful for treating allergies:

- **Acidophilus**: Assists in digestion of foods and reduces the potential for allergies
- **Antioxidants**: Needed for proper immune function and to destroy free radicals
- **CoQ10**: Improves cellular oxygenation and immune function
- **Essential Fatty Acids**: Reduces inflammatory responses associated with allergies
- **Vitamin B Complex**: Needed for proper digestion and nerve function, Vitamin B6 helps to relieve wheezing and allergy attacks
- **Vitamin C**: Protects the body from allergens and moderates the inflammatory response

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*Above promotions are valid only at Raffles Health Retail Pharmacy and Raffles Medical Clinics.*
Healthy Spaghetti with Tomatoes

Servings per recipe: 4

Ingredients

- 1 tablespoon olive oil
- 1 onion
- 3 tablespoons fresh sweet basil
- 6 tomatoes
- 1 1/2 cups cooked chicken
- 1/3 package of spaghetti
- Salt
- Pepper
- Parmesan cheese (optional)

Preparation

1. Bring water to boil in a large pot. Boil tomatoes in water for about 1 minute. Scoop the tomatoes out and drain it with cold water to let it cool.
2. Take a knife and slice an "X" on the bottom of each tomato. Then peel the skin from all the tomatoes and discard. Chop the tomatoes.
3. Chop the onion and fresh sweet basil. Shred the cooked chicken.
4. In a non-stick pot, heat the olive oil. Fry the chopped onions for five minutes. Add in the chopped tomatoes, stir them with the onions then season it with salt and pepper.
5. Cover the pot and let it simmer for 30-40 minutes, return occasionally to stir and season.
6. Meanwhile, cook the spaghetti according to package instructions.
7. After 30 minutes, add the shredded chicken and basil to the pot.
8. When chicken is heated through, turn off the stove and place spaghetti into pot.
9. Toss thoroughly and serve with parmesan cheese if you like.

Nutrition Information per Serving

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“This is an easy and tasty dish made with simple, fresh ingredients. The red pigment in tomatoes is called lycopene. This compound appears to act as an antioxidant, neutralising free radicals that can damage cells in the body. Though raw tomatoes are great for you, cooking them releases even more of their benefits! Therefore, give this recipe a try.”

Ms Nehal Kamdar, Senior Dietitian, Raffles Internal Medicine Centre
Q: My sinus condition acts up whenever I travel overseas during spring, resulting in hay fever. I will get bad headaches, a fever and runny nose. How can I improve my condition and prevent it from flaring up when there are allergens in the air?

A: As you have correctly diagnosed, you have hay fever. Your nose and sinuses are acting up as a result of your allergy to the high pollen count in the air during spring. Due to the nasal congestion, your sinuses are also blocked up resulting in pressure headaches over your sinuses primarily over the nasal bridge, forehead and cheekbones. The increased nasal discharge and swelling in your nasal passages in turn increases the chance of a secondary viral or bacterial infection, hence the fever.

The aim of treatment is to pre-empt the allergic reaction before you fly to these temperate countries. You should see your doctor for a course of anti-histamine and a steroid nasal spray before the trip. If you start the medication three to four days before the trip, it will help to reduce the nasal congestion and discharge. You should also continue these medications during the whole trip until you return to home. These medications are safe and have no long-term side effects.

Dr Aw Chong Yin,
Specialist in Ear, Nose & Throat Surgery,
Raffles ENT Centre

Q: Is it possible to have a sun allergy? My six-years-old son’s skin breaks out in hives, when he’s exposed to the sun even for a few minutes. Could this be an allergy to the sun? What is it? What are the symptoms? Is there any solution to cure him of this problem or any treatment available?

A: Yes, sun allergy is possible. The condition is known as solar urticaria. It is an uncommon disorder where hives or wheals are induced by exposure to ultraviolet and/or visible light.

Unfortunately the cause is still unknown but it is thought that a chemical present in the body reacts with light, causing an allergic reaction which manifests as hives. It can occur at any age, but is seen most commonly between 20 and 30 years of age.

Treatment consists of sunlight avoidance and use of sunscreens. Using sunscreen may offer some protection. Oral antihistamines taken before sunlight exposure may minimise symptoms. Some examples of antihistamines include non-sedating ones such as loratidine or cetirizine.

However, most cases resolve spontaneously after a few years even without treatment. The diagnosis needs to be confirmed by phototesting though, so you should bring your son to see a dermatologist for further assessment.

Dr Chris Foo,
Specialist in Dermatology,
Raffles Skin Centre
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