

14 allergy strategies that bring relief fast

DON'T RESIGN YOURSELF TO SNEEZING AND WATERY EYES. MAKE THIS THE YEAR YOU RECLAIM THE OUTDOORS – WITH THESE EXPERT TIPS.

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Your nose is running, your eyes are itching and your brain is fuzzy. As much as you'd love to just curl up with a box of tissues, you shrug it off and soldier on. After all, it's only allergies, right?

While it's easy to trivialise these annoying symptoms – which plague some 20 per cent of Singaporeans – experts say they're nothing to sneeze at. Nose allergy reduces productivity at work and gives you a poor quality of sleep, which leads to a fall in immunity, says Dr Kevin Soh, senior consultant ear, nose and throat (ENT) surgeon at the Mount Elizabeth Hospital. This makes you more prone to coughs and colds, which in turn, worsens allergy symptoms, he says.

Allergies act up especially when you're exposed to house dust mites, pet fur and pollen from the trees and flowers. An overzealous immune system mistakes these harmless particles for intruders and releases inflammatory chemicals called histamines and leukotrienes to combat them, explains Thomas B. Casale, chief of allergy/immunology at Creighton University School of Medicine in the US, and president of the American Academy of Allergy, Asthma, and Immunology (AAAAI). Consequently, your airways and nasal linings swell, triggering congestion, wheezing, and foggy thinking.

Although experts aren't clear why people develop the lifelong condition in the first place, they say genes are partly to blame. While there's no instant fix for nasal allergies, making a few tweaks to your environment and schedule – like showering at night instead of in the morning. – can alleviate symptoms. Try these easy everyday strategies and you'll stay snuffle-free.

At home

* Block out allergens

The number one anti-allergy move is to keep the triggers at bay. If you're allergic to dust mites, leave the doors and windows open; if your enemy is pollen, keep them shut whenever you can, says Dr Soh.

Then, run the air conditioner on the "recycle" setting, which filters the air that's indoors. "That will trap any particles that did sneak inside," says Dr Eric Schenkel, a US-based clinical assistant professor of medicine. Also, rinse or replace the filter every two weeks to remove any dust and keep it running efficiently.

* Hit the laundry room more frequently

Wash your sheets once a week on the hot cycle: Korean researchers recently found that water heated to 60 deg C eliminates virtually all allergens, including pollen and dust mites – sneeze-causing organisms that thrive in humid weather. If you have stuffed animals, wash them weekly or wrap them in a plastic bag and leave them in the freezer overnight to kill off dust mites, says Dr Soh.

* Skip the feather duster

Swinging a dry duster around will just cause you to breathe in more dust mites, says Dr Soh. Use a damp towel to clean up the dust instead.

*** Give your medication a checkup**

While some may find relief with an over-the-counter medicine, such as Claritin, Alavert, or Zyrtec-D (anti-histamines), others may prefer a stronger one-a-day prescription tablet, such as Singulair. Ask your doctor for her recommendations but don't mix your meds as that may lead to dizziness, increased heartbeat, and nausea. But what's most important is that you take allergy medications as regularly as suggested by a doctor to ward off attacks, rather than when you're just experiencing symptoms.

*** Try a spray**

If you find that pills aren't easing your symptoms, your doctor may prescribe a preventive nasal steroid like Nasacort, Flixonase or Nasonex. "Spraying nasal steroids is one of the safest and most effective way to treat nose allergies," says Dr Soh, who adds that you shouldn't be scared off by the word "steroid". "Nasal sprays are extremely safe. Very little of it actually gets into your circulatory system. The main side effects are

mostly confined to some discomfort in the nose, but this resolves once you master the technique to use the spray effectively," he says. To do that, lower your head before you spray. Also, avoid spraying directly onto the nasal septum (the wall between your nostrils). The tissues that need to be treated lie on the side, not the middle, explains Dr Soh.

*** Get your shots**

If medications, avoiding known allergens and surgery (to remove polyps, straighten the septum, or to widen blocked sinuses) fail to work, you may consider allergy shots called immunotherapy. An allergist will inject you with gradually increasing doses of an allergen one to three times a week over the course of up to seven months. This enables you to develop build up tolerance to the offending substance. (After that, you'll get the shots once a month for three to five years.) "Shots change the immune system's pathway," says Dr Randolph. "They are effective for a number of years, and they can even prevent the development of other allergies as well as asthma."

is it allergies...or a cold?

Both conditions produce a runny nose and cough. But certain differences can help you pinpoint what you're suffering from, says Dr Eric Schenkel, a professor of medicine at Long Island College Hospital.

SYMPTOM	COLD	ALLERGY
Itchy eyes, ears, throat	No	Yes – one of the most common complaints
Runny nose	Sometimes thick, yellow discharge	Always thin, clear discharge
Sneezing	Occasionally	Four or five sneezes in a row
Stuffy nose	Occurs at onset	Develops after a few weeks
Sore throat	Occurs at onset	Develops later due to postnasal drip
Fatigue	Yes, alone with some achiness	None, but thinking may be fuzzy
Duration	Three to five days, with symptoms gradually easing	Weeks or months, with variable symptoms

breathe easy with these natural fixes

1 NASAL IRRIGATION

New research from the University of Michigan, finds that a simple saltwater solution can offer relief from symptoms. "It's perfect for post-nasal drip or if mucus has become thick or dry, causing congestion," says lead author, Dr Melissa A. Pynnonen. Dissolve a quarter of a teaspoon each of kosher salt and baking soda in a cup of warm water. Using a bulb syringe, squirt bottle, or neti pot (\$34.90, Whatever Bookstore & Cafe), gush this solution into your right nasal passage while leaning over a sink. Then, tilt your head to the left, allowing the water to drain out of your left nostril; repeat on the other side.

2 QUERCETIN

Taken in tablet or caplet form, this bioflavonoid, found in foods like red wine, tea, and apples, has anti-inflammatory effects. Researchers from Boston University School of Medicine found that quercetin helps block the production of symptom-causing histamines. A 1,000mg tablet, taken one to three times a day, is enough to alleviate allergies, says Dr William S. Silvers, a professor at the University of Colorado.

3 OMEGA-3S

These anti-inflammatory fatty acids may alleviate symptoms in hay fever sufferers, reports a study in the journal *Allergy*. Dr Silvers recommends having a serving of cold-water fish, such as salmon or mackerel, walnuts, ground flaxseed, or a fish-oil supplement at least three to four times a week.





Keep your pets allergen-free by wiping them down frequently.

* Clear the air

Many allergy sufferers are also bothered by fragrances and cleaning products, says Dr Soh. To breathe easier, invest in a HEPA air purifier, which filters out aggravating indoor particulate pollutants. A good pick: Honeywell 17450 air purifier (\$879, Allergo Healthcare). It also has a carbon filter to counter fumes from household cleaners.

* Put pets in their place

Dogs and cats that frolic outdoors can collect pollen in their fur and transport it into your home. Ban your pet from your bedroom or at least keep him off the furniture, says Dr Clifford W. Bassett, an assistant clinical professor of medicine at Long Island College Hospital in New York. Bathe it as frequently as possible or wipe him down when he comes in from outside with a pre-moistened cloth.

* Rethink your bedtime routine

Hopping in the shower in the morning is one way to kick-start your day, but switching to a night-time routine can help curb your symptoms. You'll wash away irritants that stick to your hair and face, so they won't rub off on your pillow and irritate your eyes and nose. "If you're really tired at the end of the day, you should at the very least gently clean your eyelids with

a little baby shampoo each evening," suggests Dr Bassett.

During outdoor workouts

* Fine-tune your fitness routine

"You breathe at least twice as fast when you're working out, which means you'll inhale even more allergens if you exercise outdoors," says Dr Brian Smart, a Chicago allergist and AAAAI spokesperson. Morning exercisers are hit hardest of all because airborne allergens peak during the early hours, starting at 4 am and lasting until noon. Because pollen rises as morning dew evaporates, the ideal time for an outdoor workout is in the mid-afternoon, says Dr Christopher C. Randolph, a clinical associate professor at Yale University's Division of Allergy in Connecticut. He notes that where you work out can also matter: Exercising on the beach, an

asphalt tennis court, the track at your neighbourhood stadium, or in the swimming pool are better options than working out on a grassy field.

* Run right after it rains

"The best time to hit the pavement is immediately after a downpour, because the moisture washes away the pollen for up to several hours," says Dr Gillian Shepherd, a clinical associate professor of medicine at Cornell University. But once the air dries, take cover: The additional moisture generates even more pollen and mould, which can hang around for a few days afterward.

* Slip on shades

Not only do wraparound sunglasses shield you from harmful UV rays, they'll also stop airborne allergens from getting in your eyes. Another way to ward off symptoms: Use allergy-relieving eyedrops, such as Naphcon (\$6, pharmacies), a few hours before heading outside. This will combat histamines, which are the compounds that cause your eyes to water and itch.

* Drink up

Fill up a water bottle or hydration pack to bring on your run, walk, or bike ride. "Fluids help thin mucus and hydrate the airways, so you won't get as stuffed up," says Dr William S. Silvers, a US-based clinical professor of allergy and immunology. Then, use the rest to rinse off any pollen that's on your face and hands.

At the doctor's office

* ID your triggers

"If you know what they are, you'll know how to defend yourself against them," says Dr Smart. Request a skin-prick test, in which an allergist applies a man-made version of the potential allergen to your forearm and makes a small prick in the skin so the solution can enter. If you're allergic, a lump resembling a mosquito bite will appear at the site.

A woman with long dark hair, wearing a white sleeveless top, is smiling and smelling a bouquet of colorful flowers (orange, pink, and yellow). The background is a soft-focus green field.

Take time
to smell the
flowers, but
be careful of
the sneeze-
causing pollen.

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3. Gentamicin therapy is safe:

Unlike labyrinthectomy and vestibular neurectomy, gentamicin therapy obviates the need for general anesthesia. This is important in elderly patients who may have other concomitant medical conditions that will increase the risks with anesthesia. It is therefore useful for patients who are unfit for anesthesia or who are reluctant to undergo major surgery.

4. Gentamicin therapy is effective:

With titration dosage schedules, vertigo control can be obtained with minimal risk to hearing. Gentamicin treatment can also alleviate symptoms like tinnitus

and aural fullness, and improve the quality of life and functional ability. Unlike labyrinthectomy and vestibular neurectomy that works by ablating vestibular function, gentamicin may actually reverse the hydropic state, thus normalizing and preserving the function of the inner ear.

5. Gentamicin therapy preserves:

Titration therapy leaves behind some residual vestibular function so that the risk of vestibular insufficiency after treatment is minimized. This is important, as there is a 10% to 60% chance of the other ear developing Meniere's disease. Because titration therapy does not completely abolish the

vestibular reflexes, it may also be used in the other ear should the need arise.

6. Gentamicin treatment enhances the quality of life:

Using the six-point Functional Level Scale (Table 1) proposed by the Committee on Hearing and Equilibrium, overall function improved dramatically by more than 90%. The reason for the high degree of functional enhancement is because gentamicin controls vertigo effectively, alleviates tinnitus and aural fullness, spares hearing, and preserves vestibular function so that post-treatment vestibular insufficiency is minimized.

Six Point Functional Level Scale

(Committee on Hearing and Equilibrium 1995)

Minor 1999	94% improvement
McFeely et al 1998	92% improvement
Driscoll et al 1997	96% improvement

Table 1: Three studies showing that gentamicin treatment for intractable Meniere's disease was associated with more than 90% functional improvement as evaluated on criteria recommended by the Committee on Hearing and Equilibrium.