

Environmental Allergies

An allergy is your body's reaction to certain foreign substances, known as allergens. The term medical professional environmental allergies medical professional simply refers to those allergens that are commonly found in the environment where you live or work. These allergens include pollen, dust, animal dander, mold or mildew. The single most common cause of an environmental allergy that occurs indoors is the dust mite. Dust mites are found in bedding, in the fabric of upholstered furniture, in the carpet, or wherever dust typically accumulates. Environmental allergens are usually inhaled, and they tend to cause such symptoms as sneezing, a runny nose, and itchy eyes. They also may cause asthma, a cough, or a stuffy nose.

Although it's not easy, the best way to control environmental allergies is to identify and avoid the allergens that cause them. If your symptoms are seasonal and seem to be related to pollen, try to limit the amount of time that you spend outdoors. If your symptoms occur year-round, you'll want to begin changing your indoor environment. Start by making improvements in the room where you spend the most time; that's usually the bedroom. Try removing dust catchers such as throw rugs, stuffed animals, or stacks of magazines or newspapers. Cover the pillows and mattress in zippered vinyl cases. Wash bedding in hot water every week. Since most vacuum cleaners don't really pick up dust mites very well, drapes, carpeting, and the fabric of upholstered furniture are best replaced by vertical window blinds, smooth surfaced floors, and furniture. If possible, you also might want to have someone else clean the house. At least, you should wear a surgical-style mask while you clean.

If you discover mold in your house, clean it aggressively with bleach or a cleaning product, such as Lysol; but do so by using a cleaning product that you don't find irritating itself. Again, wearing a surgical-style mask while performing this chore may help. Also, try to keep the house well ventilated and dry. Ideally, you'll want to try to keep the humidity in the house to below 50 percent. A de-humidifier works well for this purpose, especially during humid weather.

If you suspect you are allergic to a pet, it is best to keep it outdoors, but at a minimum should never be allowed in the bedroom. And bathe it at least twice a month.

What do you do if you can't avoid your allergens? If your reaction is fairly mild, try nonprescription antihistamines. They work best if taken before exposure to the cause.

If you have signs of a severe allergic reaction, however, go to the Emergency Room immediately. If your symptoms are less severe but aren't relieved by nonprescription drugs, you should call your medical professional. He or she may prescribe a stronger medication—or refer you to the Allergy Department for evaluation. If referred, you'll receive a detailed questionnaire and possibly skin tests to help determine what causes your allergic reactions. Then the Allergy Department will recommend specific treatments to manage your allergies. These may include a series of shots to desensitize your body to the allergen. Whether the treatment is nonprescription antihistamines, a doctor's prescription, or injections, it works best if you combine it with avoiding the things that cause your allergic reaction.

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For more health information ...

- Connect to our Web site at *members.kp.org*
- Check your *Kaiser Permanente Healthwise Handbook*.
- Listen to the Kaiser Permanente Healthphone at 1-800-332-7563. For TTY, call 1-800-777-9059.
- Visit your facility's Health Education Department for books, videos, classes, and additional resources.

This information is not intended to diagnose health problems or to take the place of medical advice or care you receive from your physician or other medical professional. If you have persistent health problems, or if you have additional questions, please consult with your doctor.

If you have questions or need more information about your medication, please speak to your pharmacist.

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If you have an emergency medical condition, call 911 or go to the nearest hospital. When you have an emergency medical condition, we cover emergency care from Plan providers and non-Plan providers anywhere in the world.

An emergency medical condition is (1) a medical or psychiatric condition that manifests itself by acute symptoms of sufficient severity (including severe pain) such that you could reasonably expect the absence of immediate medical attention to result in serious jeopardy to your health or serious impairment or dysfunction of your bodily functions or organs; or, (2) when you are in active labor and there isn't enough time for safe transfer to a Plan hospital before delivery, or if transfer poses a threat to your or your unborn child's health and safety.