

# what's making you



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*Four surprising reasons allergies could be hitting you this year—and how to feel better fast.*

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BY BARBARA BRODY

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## **YOU CAN DEVELOP ALLERGIES AT ANY AGE**

Just because you never had them growing up doesn't mean you're off the hook. Symptoms can crop up in your 20s, 30s, 40s—pretty much at any point. Blame a combo of genes and environmental triggers, says Luz Fonacier, M.D., a professor of clinical medicine at SUNY Stony Brook University. You might have had the problem all along but didn't know—for example, you have a mold allergy but grew up in a dry climate. Or, because one allergy puts you at risk for others, you might have outgrown one sensitivity only to develop another.

Your first step is to figure out exactly what's triggering a reaction; seeing an allergist for a round of testing is the best way to do that. Skin tests—in which small amounts of allergens are applied topically to see whether you react—are most common, giving results in just 20 minutes. (Blood tests might be needed due to skin conditions or a severe allergy.)

Next, talk to the doc about what medications will work best for you. Most people find relief for itchy eyes, runny nose, congestion, and sneezing with an over-the-counter antihistamine pill or nasal spray, although you might have to kick it up to a prescription. Nasal steroid sprays (OTC and Rx), which reduce swelling in the nasal passages, tend to be more potent. And leukotriene inhibitors can help respiratory symptoms by easing inflammation in the airways. Often, it takes a bit of trial and error to find the right med—or combination—to really get relief.

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### SEASONAL ALLERGIES CAN MAKE INDOOR ALLERGIES WORSE

Due to a phenomenon called priming, reactions can play off each other. Here's how it works: Say you're allergic to cats and ragweed. If the cat allergy is mild, you might be able to spend a brief amount of time with a friend's cat. But when ragweed season arrives, being around a cat could be intolerable, because your immune system has already been revved up by the ragweed. "Exposure to one allergen increases your overall sensitivity; it's synergistic," says Gerald Lee, M.D., chief of allergy and immunology at University of Louisville School of Medicine.

If you have multiple allergies, or a severe one, consider shots (aka immunotherapy), in which you're given the allergen in gradually increasing doses so that you eventually become desensitized and have a very mild reaction, or none at all.

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### MOLD CAN BE MORE OF A PROBLEM OUTDOORS THAN IN

By all means, keep up your cleaning regimen to tame household mold hot spots like shower curtains, bathtubs, tile, and garbage cans. But airborne mold spores (which are easily inhaled) are the bigger symptom triggers, and those levels tend to be higher outdoors, especially in late summer and fall, Lee says. Steer clear of moldy areas including fresh-cut grass, compost piles, and, of course, rotting branches and decaying leaves.

As with other allergies, timing your meds right can make a huge difference. "If you take medication before you head into potentially damp and moldy territory—a hike in the woods, for example—it's possible not to have any symptoms," Lee says.



## IS IT A COLD OR ALLERGIES?

*Both can give you that sniffy, sneezy, generally miserable feeling. So how can you tell the difference? A few clues:*

**PATTERN** Do you tend to get a cold every fall and/or spring? Do your symptoms get worse when you change locations, or step outside or inside? All these signs point to allergies.

**SYMPTOMS** Cold and allergy symptoms are pretty similar with one noted exception: Colds don't usually make your nose and eyes itch.

**DURATION** "Most viral infections last about seven to ten days," Lee says. If you've been feeling lousy longer, allergies might be the culprit, or you could have a bacterial sinus infection. In either case, you'll need to see a doc for the right diagnosis and treatment.

## BREATHE EASIER WHILE GARDENING

*You don't have to give it up just because you have allergies.*

**WORK WHEN POLLEN COUNTS ARE LOWEST** Often, that's right after a rainfall, but check the pollen counts in your area at [pollen.aaaai.org](http://pollen.aaaai.org). And watch out for wind, says Marvin Pritts, Ph.D., chair of the horticulture department at Cornell University. "Dry, windy weather prompts plants to shed lots of pollen, so that's the worst time to be outside," he says.

**GEAR UP** A simple move like wearing a mask can decrease the amount of pollen and mold spores you inhale and help prevent a reaction. After you finish gardening, remember to change clothes (shower if you can) as soon as you come inside.

**TAKE A SHOT** The worst seasons for allergies—spring and fall—happen to be the best times to garden, so allergy shots might be the most effective way to truly enjoy growing your garden worry- and symptom-free.



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**IF YOU HAVE HAY FEVER, CERTAIN FRUITS AND VEGETABLES CAN CAUSE A REACTION**

You might not have a true food allergy if your mouth itches or swells when you eat certain produce. It could be a condition called oral allergy syndrome, a reaction that occurs because some plants, fruits, and vegetables have similar proteins. “People who have severe pollen sensitivity can end up with symptoms that mimic food reactions,” Lee says. If you’re very allergic to birch pollen, watch out for apples, almonds, carrots, celery, cherries, hazelnuts, kiwi, peaches, pears, and plums. Bad grass pollen allergies? Celery, melons, oranges, peaches, and tomatoes could be your troublemakers. And those with strong ragweed allergies might need to be careful with bananas, cucumbers, melons, sunflower seeds, and zucchini.

The good news is that these reactions aren’t generally dangerous, and they usually affect just your mouth. An antihistamine like Benadryl can tame localized discomfort, and cooking the problematic foods can also help. “Heat breaks down the proteins in the foods that trigger a reaction, so they’re less potent,” Lee says. While peaches might be problematic, peach pie could be a go!



To head off seasonal allergies, start taking meds one to two weeks before peak season hits.



DOES IT WORK?

**Beyond the meds and shots: Docs weigh in on how anti-allergy products and natural treatments stack up.**

**NETI POTS** *Go for it.* Rinsing your sinuses with a saltwater solution is an easy, effective way to flush out pollen and other allergens so they don’t make their way into your respiratory system and stir up a reaction.

**VACUUM CLEANERS WITH HEPA FILTERS** *You bet.* It’s worth investing in a vacuum with this type of filter, so you can minimize the amount of debris that gets blown around the room while you’re vacuuming, Lee says. Opt for one that uses bags; it’ll keep more of the debris contained when you empty it.

**AIR PURIFIERS** *It depends.* “HEPA filters only get rid of particles that are light enough to linger in the air,” Fonacier says. They tend to be most useful for catching pet dander. If outdoor allergens (ragweed, birch pollen, etc.) are your downfall, don’t bother. Just keep your windows and doors closed and run the air conditioner.

**NASAL BARRIER** *Maybe.* Products that you apply to the inside of your nose (like Nasaleze, Sinubalm, HayMax) can trap allergens so they don’t make it to your lungs. But in order for them to work, you’ll need to reapply multiple times a day.

**DUST MITE LAUNDRY ADDITIVES** *Yeah, but...* Even though these products probably do kill dust mites, so does simply washing bedding in hot water at least once a week. Dry cleaning does the job, too.

**ALLERGEN-TRAPPING DOORMATS** *Not so much.* Antimicrobial-treated mats are said to trap or neutralize allergens at your entryway—but they probably don’t make a difference. “Allergens aren’t only on your feet, they’re all over,” Fonacier says. You’re better off ditching your shoes at the door, and, if you’ve been outdoors for a while, changing your clothes.



## BRING ON THE BLOOMS

**SURPRISE!** The more colorful and ornate the flower, the less likely it is to make you sniffle: Bright flowers pollinate by attracting insects, which then spread the pollen. Their pollen is usually on the flower or an insect. Plain-looking flowers simply release pollen into the air (and your nose), explains Marvin Pritts, Ph.D., chair of the horticulture department at Cornell University. He says these varieties, *right*, are friendlier to allergy sufferers. Just don't bring your nose in very close for a whiff! ■



PHOTOS: (GERBERA DAISY, ASTER, MUMS) BLAINE MCATS; (LILY, ALSTROEMERIA) SHUTTERSTOCK; (DAHLIA) LAURIE BLACK; (TULIPS) ADAM ALBRIGHT; (CARNATION) MARTY BALDWIN; (ROSE) PETER ARDITO