WHAT CAUSES ALLERGY?

Many people wonder what causes their allergic symptoms and why they are worse at certain times. These symptoms occur when the body mistakenly identifies as dangerous certain things a person is allergic to and reacts to them as if they were germs or viruses. In the process, chemical substances are released from some cells of the body, causing allergy symptoms. No one knows for sure why some people are allergic and others are not. But it is suspected that the tendency to develop allergies is inherited.

Your allergy began when your body for some reason became sensitive to a particular substance, called an antigen or an allergen. The antigen or allergen can cause the body to form antibodies, which are protective mechanisms. Sometimes antigens and antibodies combine to react with a sensitized cell, and histamine and other chemicals are released. Once freed, histamine has the power to cause many kinds of allergic symptoms. It can stimulate the glands that secrete mucus, tears, and saliva — accounting for the runny noses and eyes, congested lungs, and coughing of allergic patients. It causes swelling, which often results in a stuffed-up feeling in the nose, ears, and chest. It can also cause headaches, hives, and a general feeling of itchiness. And, finally, it can tighten the muscles in the lungs and gastrointestinal tract and bring on asthma attacks and abdominal cramps.

In some people, allergic symptoms may be triggered by many nonallergic factors — including emotional stress, fatigue, infection, air pollution, and weather changes. This explains why you may react severely to allergens one day and not at all the next day. These triggering factors add to what doctors call your "allergic load." Your allergic load refers to the amount of allergens your body can handle at any given time. If you exceed your allergic load, symptoms develop.

Part of successfully managing your condition is learning the factors that add to your allergic load, causing you to exceed your capacity to handle allergens without symptoms. At the times when your allergic load is greatest, you may find that avoiding the nonallergic factors may lighten it enough to ease your symptoms.

Antigen — Antibody Interaction