



Alleviating allergies

Are allergies making you miserable? Soothe your sniffles, itches and tears with natural approaches that encompass lifestyle change, diet, herbs and your mind.

Words CAROLINE ROBERTSON

Decades ago, food allergies were relatively rare. Today allergies are among the fastest-growing conditions in Australia, according to the Australasian Society of Clinical Immunology and Allergy (ASCIA). Approximately 20 per cent of Australians have an allergic disease with 10 per cent of infants experiencing immediate food allergies. Food allergies and eczema are more common in children. Insect allergy, drug allergy, asthma and allergic rhinitis (or hay fever) are more prevalent in older people.

Allergens are substances that provoke allergies. Potential allergens are everywhere — in the air, animals, food, drink, cleaning agents, personal care products, insect stings, medicines, plants, metals, latex and agricultural products. Studies show that while we can outgrow allergies to cow's milk, egg, soy or wheat, approximately 75 per cent of children have persistent allergies to nuts, sesame and seafood. The mechanism of allergies is clear but their cause and cure remains hazy.

Allergies explained

There are two types of allergies, IgE-mediated and non-IgE-mediated.

An IgE-mediated response is when the body reacts to a usually harmless substance by releasing immunoglobulin E antibodies. These attach to mast cells

Photography Getty Images



that then release granules and chemicals such as histamine, cytokines, leukotrienes, heparin and proteases. Many mediators cause characteristic allergy symptoms such as rashes, hives, itching, streaming eyes, congested or runny nose, asthmatic breathing, tingly mouth or lips, swelling and anaphylaxis in severe cases.

An IgE-mediated food allergy generally shows symptoms within hours, whereas a non-IgE-mediated food hypersensitivity can take from hours to weeks to manifest. According to the Royal Children's Hospital Melbourne, "Non-IgE-mediated food allergies are caused by a reaction involving other components of the immune system apart from IgE antibodies. The reactions do not appear immediately after the ingestion of the food and usually relate to reactions in the gastrointestinal tract such as vomiting, bloating and diarrhoea."

Non-IgE-mediated food allergy usually has gastrointestinal symptoms such as cramps, bloat, vomiting and bowel issues. This is commonly caused by foods such as cow's milk, egg, peanut, tree nuts, wheat, soy, sesame, fish and shellfish. Rates of non-IgE-mediated food allergies such as eosinophilic esophagitis are escalating in Australia. Non-IgE-mediated food allergies include intestinal coeliac disease, eosinophilic esophagitis (affecting the oesophagus), FPIES (impacting the small intestine) and proctocolitis (seated in the large intestine).

The mainstay of management for these conditions involves allergen avoidance with subsequent food challenge testing according to each individual. Some may outgrow an allergy or observe lifelong allergen abstinence. Therapeutic support such as allergen immunotherapy, medication, nutrition, supplements, herbs and mind-body healing can offer great relief for both IgE and non-IgE-related allergies. Anaphylactic reactions require immediate medication with subsequent preventive measures.

Intolerance, allergy or anaphylaxis?

Many confuse food allergy with food intolerance. According to the American Academy of Allergy, Asthma and Immunology (AAAAI), "A food intolerance response takes place in the digestive system. A food allergic reaction involves



the immune system. Unlike an intolerance to food, a food allergy can cause a serious or even life-threatening reaction by eating a microscopic amount, touching or inhaling the food."

Hence food intolerance symptoms are considered less serious, and may be managed by improving digestion, taking limited quantities of the food or preventing a reaction with a substance like lactase if intolerant to lactose. Food intolerances can have many causes, including lack of enzymes, irritable bowel syndrome, sensitivity to additives, stress, gut dysbiosis, increased intestinal permeability (leaky gut) or coeliac disease.

Anaphylaxis is a life-threatening emergency involving more than one body system. It is caused by an IgE-related allergy rather than a non-IgE issue. Anaphylaxis may be evident by any one of the following symptoms:

- difficult/noisy breathing
- swelling of the tongue
- swelling/tightness in throat
- difficulty talking and/or hoarse voice
- wheeze or sudden persistent cough
- persistent dizziness or collapse
- pale and floppy (of young children)
- abdominal pain and vomiting (for insect sting or injected drug allergy).

Avoiding exposure to the anaphylactic agent is ideal, but if anaphylaxis occurs, swift, sure action can be lifesaving. It is essential to keep an anaphylactic casualty still, either lying down or sitting, administer an adrenalin autoinjector and call 000 followed by emergency contacts. The adrenalin autoinjector is a single-use device which may be used by non-medical people. It can reduce airway

swelling, induce bronchodilation, induce vasoconstriction and increase strength of cardiac contraction. If uncertain whether the symptoms are due to anaphylaxis or asthma, then give the adrenalin autoinjector followed by the asthma inhaler. If symptoms do not subside within five minutes another adrenalin autoinjector may be administered. The casualty must then stay still for four hours under medical observation as there can be a second surge of anaphylactic reaction.

Curious how casualties feel after an adrenalin shot? Pounding heartbeat, nervousness, sweating, nausea, vomiting, difficult breathing, headache, dizziness, anxiety, shakiness or pale skin are common reactions. If it is the first time experiencing anaphylaxis it is vital to identify the trigger and carry an adrenalin autoinjector at all times if old enough to self-administer it. ASCIA advises that high school and upper primary school students should usually carry at least one device on their person.

There are currently two types of EpiPens available in Australia: the green EpiPen Junior (0.15mg) for children under 20kg, and the yellow EpiPen adult (0.3mg) for those over 20kg. They may be purchased with a prescription or in some cases without a prescription, depending on the circumstance. To learn how to use an adrenaline autoinjector visit allergy.org.au/hp/anaphylaxis/how-to-give-epipen.

Defences up

Allergies can occur at any age, with myriad symptoms, severity and duration. Atopic people have a heightened immune response to common allergens, often due to a genetic predisposition to develop allergies. Childhood atopic diseases include atopic dermatitis, allergic rhinitis, asthma and food allergy.

Allergies are a response to innocuous invaders. Defence forces try to flush, constrict and swell the substance from

Allergies can occur at any age, with myriad symptoms, severity and duration.



our system, waging an irksome inner war. The casualties are commonly the skin, respiratory system and digestive system.

Many people have a team of triggers, such as one patient who was allergic to cheap earrings, grass, eggs and calendula herb. Airborne allergens include pollen, animal dander, dust mites, mould and more. Common food allergens like peanuts, tree nuts, wheat, soy, fish, shellfish, eggs, milk, pineapple, strawberries and insect stings such as from a bee or wasps are rife. Any medications or complementary medicines can incite allergies, particularly penicillin or penicillin-based antibiotics.

Inconclusive theories abound regarding the rising rate in allergies. Contributing causes appear to be a multifactorial interplay between a person's genetic make-up (genotype) and their interaction with the environment (phenotype). Hypotheses postulate it could be due to increased medications, pollution, toxic overload, inadequate exposure to microbes, food quality, an imbalanced gut microbiome, genetics, impaired skin barriers, delayed introduction of allergenic foods, environmental factors and psychological influences. Allergy tests sometimes offer invaluable insights into the cause and extent of allergic conditions.

Allergy tests

People suffering allergic symptoms can be clueless about the cause. Allergy tests are invaluable to identify the allergen and the degree of sensitivity. This may involve blood, urine or stool samples. Non-IgE-mediated food allergies are

often diagnosed according to symptoms in response to specific foods. A food eliminate-rechallenge test over weeks can also pinpoint the allergens. The Oral Food Challenge is the gold standard to confirm the diagnosis after the resolution of symptoms under an elimination diet.

Other specific tests for non-IgE-mediated food allergies may include an examination, endoscopy and in rare cases biopsy, such as with FPE (food protein-induced enteropathy) or cow's milk-sensitive enteropathy.

In a skin test, small amounts of different allergens are placed on an individual's skin, usually with a pinprick. People who are allergic to these substances will develop hives at this area. A person can develop a serious reaction to an allergen used in a skin test, whereas there is no risk of this with a blood test. Practitioners may prefer a blood test to a skin prick test when testing children as it only takes one prick whereas a skin test requires many, it allows patients to remain on medication for the test and it minimises the risk of aggravating existing skin conditions such as psoriasis. According to Food Allergy Research & Education (FARE), 50 to 60 per cent of blood and skin prick tests will yield some "false positives", meaning the test will show that a person is allergic to something when they are not. Ideally, follow-up tests will confirm the definitive diagnosis.

Allergy all-stars

Though allergies are complex, there are simple solutions for significant relief. The natural approach generally helps to reduce mucous, protect passages, normalise immunity, optimise digestion and minimise

allergens. A combination of dietary modifications, cleansing, complementary therapies and lifestyle adjustments ease allergies in most cases.

One successful allopathic approach is allergen immunotherapy. This desensitises the immune system by administering regular, gradually increasing amounts of the allergen by drops or injections. Sublingual immunotherapy improved allergy symptoms by 40 per cent according to an analysis of 63 randomised controlled trials. Alexandra Santos, an associate professor in paediatric allergy at King's College London, advises it may be beneficial to introduce potential allergens early, as "there is this window of opportunity in the early years to establish tolerance." Her study showed introducing peanuts between four and 11 months gave five-year-old children an 80 per cent reduced probability of having peanut allergy. Some caregivers are taking their children to a medical doctor for the initial taste of potential allergens. It should be noted that anaphylaxis often occurs after a preceding mild to moderate allergic reaction to the same substance.

Diet, nutrition and herbs

Considering an estimated 80 per cent of the immune system is located in the gut, improving the digestive system is pivotal to alleviating allergies. Removing gut irritants, healing the intestinal lining, optimising digestive organs and maximising the microbiome can aid allergies. Here are some general suggestions that have helped some people with their allergies.

Clear the colon with a weekly cleanse of vegetable juice or low-starch vegetable broth for a day. Flush out membranes with warm herbal tea and filtered water. Minimise mucousy foods including dairy, rice, wheat, sugar and bananas. Feast on vitamin C and flavonoid-rich foods which fortify tissues and allay histamines. These include apples, berries, broccoli, buckwheat, capers, capsicum, coriander, kale, kiwifruit, mango, papaya, parsley and watercress.

Garlic, onion and horseradish moderate dry secretions and increase immunity. Beta carotene-rich foods such as apricots, carrots, sweet potatoes, pumpkin and mango avert allergic reactions. Honey desensitises the body to pollens while optimising digestive enzymes to deal with allergens. Though honey contains pollens, a 1995 study found pollen-sensitive subjects did not react to honey pollen. Honey is best unheated, with unique manuka factor. A dash of apple-cider vinegar in warm water



Photography Getty Images

A combination of dietary modifications, cleansing, complementary therapies and lifestyle adjustments ease allergies in most cases.



optimises assimilation and elimination via its antioxidant phenols. Omega-3 fatty acids can noticeably ease allergy symptoms by reducing pro-inflammatory eicosanoids and prostaglandin. Salmon, flaxseed oil and eggs have abundant omega-3s. The essential fatty acids in fish or flaxseed oil reduce allergic inflammation. Probiotic supplements or foods like kimchi, kombucha, sauerkraut and yoghurt can lower levels of antibodies that trigger symptoms according to studies.

Healing and sealing a leaky gut decreases the allergic inflammatory response. Therapeutics such as aloe vera, glutamine, goldenseal, liquorice, marshmallow and slippery elm are soothing demulcents to soothe the intestinal mucous membrane.

Blood-purifying potions can clear skin issues. Herbal help to consider are burdock, calendula, dandelion root, echinacea, neem, red clover and yellow dock. Other herbal heroes are Ayurveda's top anti-allergy herb *Albizia lebbek*, antioxidant amalaki or Indian gooseberry and Chinese or Baikal skullcap, shown to reduce the histamine and leukotriene

release from mast cells. Perilla is an ancient Chinese remedy for rhinitis and an antidote for seafood allergies. Studies show it suppresses antigen-specific IgE production and histamine release. Pycnogenol is a French pine bark extract which is a natural antihistamine and antioxidant. A study showed it reduced birch pollen sensitivity by 39 per cent and decreased inflammatory leukotriene levels. Liquorice is an anti-allergy saviour as studies have shown that its glycyrrhetic acid has anti-inflammatory properties. Liquorice also calms the adrenals and assists mucus expectoration. Try turmeric root in juices or powder with savoury dishes as an antioxidant, anti-allergy and anti-inflammatory tonic. St Mary's thistle is a liver herb that lightens the toxin load and high histamine. Stinging nettle is a favourite herb to heal hay fever horrors. It contains formic acid which curbs hay fever flare-ups. Horseradish may be helpful for hay fever as it increases blood flow and flushes allergens away.

There are many supportive supplements for immune-influenced allergies. Vitamin C has a natural antihistamine effect that kicks in at a minimum of 1000mg/day for

adults. Liposomal C absorbs directly orally, potentially relieving oral allergy symptoms. Both low and high levels of vitamin D have been associated with allergies. It has a role in regulating immune system cells and the release of chemicals that can produce allergy symptoms. A 2021 study in *International Immunopharmacology* exhibited vitamin E's ability to inhibit inflammatory mediators in allergies.

Bioflavonoids, especially quercetin, enhance vitamin C's efficacy and help to stabilise mast cells which secrete the histamine. Quercetin is abundant in buckwheat, apples, onions, kale, tomatoes, broccoli, asparagus, berries, red wine and tea.

Enzymes assisting the digestion of potential allergens include amylase, protease, lipase, tilactase and cellulase. Enzymes bromelain in pineapple and bpapain in papaya are also natural anti-inflammatories.

Nigella sativa was effective for treating allergic rhinitis in a study published in the *American Journal of Otolaryngology*. I have also found the black seed oil effective topically for skin allergies in some cases.

Natural green clay packs can draw allergens from the skin in cases of itchy skin allergies, but must be followed with a moisturising agent to counter the dehydrating effect. Eczema sufferers can use a barrier-repair emollient to minimise moisture loss, prevent dry skin, ease itching and heal cracked skin. Application of a moisturiser may be needed up to five times a day. Natural oils such as argan, emu, kanuka, sacha inchi, jojoba, pumpkin seed and vitamin E are ideal. Herbal oils infused with calendula, chickweed, liquorice, neem and white mallow can calm angry skin allergies. Moderate use of infrared saunas or low-UV sunshine along with sea swims can calm scaly skin allergies. Drying soaps or chemical make-up should be strictly avoided until the skin settles.

Homeopathics are ideally prescribed by a qualified practitioner to ensure a suitable remedy is selected. Homeopathics that have proven results with allergies include *Allium cepa*, *Antimonium tartaricum*, *Argentum nitricum*, *Bryonia alba*, *Calcium carbonate*, *Chamomilla*, *Histaminum muriaticum*, *Natrum muriaticum* (Nat mur), *Nux vomica*, *Pulsatilla* and *Urtica urens*.

Lifestyle

Studies show a slew of allergens settle on surfaces, hence cleaning while wearing a mask and gloves is an imperative step to control allergy triggers. High-quality air filters can capture fine, microscopic-sized

... instead of reaching for allergy medication immediately, one can tap into the body's inherent relaxation response through breathwork to counter immune system overactivity.

particles. It is a good idea to get a vacuum cleaner with a filter also, as vacuums can blow allergens back into the air. Steam clean bedding, carpets, pillows, upholstery and brushes with eucalyptus oil if you suffer from dust mites.

Clear mould with borax or clove essential oil instead of bleach which tends to aggravate allergies. Prefer natural fibres instead of synthetic fabrics which attract pollens through their static.

Exercise in clean air can help allergies, but it's best when pollen counts are lowest before dawn or in the evening. Preferably swim in salt or ozone water as chlorine can aggravate skin allergies. If allergens affect the nasal passages, use a colloidal silver nasal spray or a neti pot to cleanse sinuses, followed by a smear of sesame oil or Ayurvedic anu thailam inside the nostrils to prevent allergen penetration. If eyes are irritated, itchy or streaming from allergies, rinse them in dilute and warm triphala water or fennel tea twice daily. For an irritated mouth, rinse with

activated charcoal water and cleanse with thyme or tulsi tea to flush the lymphatic-rich area. However if allergic to salicylates then this can aggravate the allergy: flush mouth with warm water in this case. Salicylate concentration can be reduced by simply cooking and peeling certain fruits and vegetables. For a list of salicylates in foods visit dietvsdisease.org/salicylate-intolerance/.

Mind over matter

Stress and allergies feed into each other. Stress exacerbates allergies by releasing substances such as adrenaline and histamine. The subsequent stream of irritating symptoms increases stress through responses such as anxiety, fear, shame, depression and self-denial. To prove the mind plays a major role in allergy causation and cure, studies have shown that some suffering from dissociative identity disorder, formerly called multiple personality disorder, may have severe allergies when in one identity and absolutely

no allergic reactions when they are another personality. Anxious people may be more prone to allergic rhinitis, as pioneering ear, nose and throat doctor Dr Morell Mackenzie observed in 1883, "that attacks of prolonged sneezing are most apt to occur in persons of nervous temperament."

Author of *Mind Over Meds*, Dr Andrew Weil, suggests that instead of reaching for allergy medication immediately, one can tap into the body's inherent relaxation response through breathwork to counter immune system overactivity. The Buteyko Institute of Breathing Health claims, "Most clients who complete the Buteyko program of breathing retraining experience significant relief in their allergic symptoms. Less sneezing, less hay fever, more tolerant gut and reduction in skin inflammation."

Psychologically, allergy can be fuelled by feelings of fear, irritation, denying oneself sensual pleasure or difficulty adapting to different people and situations. Try the daily affirmation, "The planet is a friendly place. I am peaceful and protected." 🌿

Caroline Robertson has dedicated over two decades to natural therapies. She practises as a qualified naturopath, homeopath, remedial masseuse and first aid trainer. For online or in-person consultations, health retreats and guided meditations see www.carolinerobertson.com.au.



Photography Getty Images