An allergy is your body's over-reaction to something that doesn't bother most people. For example, grasses, pollen and cat fur can cause trouble for some people.

What does it feel like?

- Sometimes your skin may have red patches and feel itchy (sometimes called 'hives').
- You may also feel hot and sweaty or sneezy
- Your eyes and nose may be sore, itchy and running (hayfever).
- Your throat could feel sore and froggy.
- Your face or other parts of your skin may swell up.
- You may feel sick or even vomit.
- You may be wheezy when you breathe, or have a cough (asthma).

These are all ways in which your body is telling you that it has been in contact with something that it doesn't like.

What causes allergies?

There are many things that can cause an allergic reaction. Some of the most common are:

- Pollen from trees, grasses or other plants, usually at certain seasons of the year when the pollen count is high.
- Dust when the weather has been very dry and windy.
- Dustmites which live in houses, especially in beds, pillows and carpets, and feed from dead skin cells.
- Animal fur or skin.
- Insect bites (bees, ants, wasps).
- Some foods or food additives, such as seafood, peanuts and milk.
- Medicines.
- Make-up or skin products and deodorants.
- Clothing and shoes, fibres and material, (or what you clean them with.) Metal, in some jewellery.
- Latex in some gloves and first aid dressings.

Alert! Some kids have a very bad reaction to peanuts, including peanut butter. Check with your teacher before taking peanut butter sandwiches to school. You could cause someone in your class to be very sick. See our topic called Anaphylaxis - when an allergy can be really dangerous if you want to know more about this.

What happens?

- Your body senses that something it doesn't like has touched your skin or entered your body (you may have breathed it in through your nose).
Antibodies in your blood, in your skin or on the lining of your nose and airways recognise that something 'foreign' is in their area, and the immune system gears up to destroy the 'foreign' thing. During the 'fight' some cells get damaged, and they release a chemical called histamine, which causes all the problems, such as swelling of the lining of the nose, itchy and running eyes, rashes and wheezing.

If you keep having allergic reactions you will need to be a detective to find out what is triggering them. Try to think back to when this all started. If you find out what has caused the allergy you might be able to avoid it in future.

Check out all the items on the list of things that cause allergies. Your doctor will help you (she has a longer list). If you can't track down what it is, then you may need to have some allergy tests to find out what is making you sick.

**Rashes**

You can get a rash from something that you are allergic to. This can happen when you touch something, but rashes can also happen sometimes if you breathe in or swallow something that you are allergic to.

Insect bites can cause a rash at the place where you were bitten, and sometimes over other parts of your body. Your skin can go red, swell, feel itchy and hot. Sometimes the rash will be in spots and patches, called 'hives', and sometimes it can be blotchy all over your body.

**What you can do.**

- Cool down the red or itchy bit. You could have a cool shower, put the affected part into a bowl or bath of cool water, or place wet cloths over the rash. You could use an ice pack, but make sure you do not put ice directly onto the skin (put a damp cloth between the ice and your skin).
- Try something like calamine lotion patted on gently and allowed to dry.
- Stay in a cool place.
- If the rash does not go back to normal in an hour or two, or it gets bigger or stays very itchy, you may need some other treatment which you can get from a doctor or a chemist shop (antihistamine tablets are often used).
- If you start to feel sick or have any trouble breathing, ask someone to get you to a doctor quickly.
Look at this list. How many of them are allergens?
Dust, flowers, trees, rabbits, bonfire smoke, brick dust, perfume, elastic, soil, cleaning sprays, paint.

How many did you get? If you said all of them you would be correct.
Remember that allergies are the way some people react to everyday things that don't bother most people.

> Some people have allergies when they are young, but grow out of them.
> Other people can develop allergies later in life.

**Finding out your triggers**

The best person to find out what is causing you to have an allergic reaction may be yourself. You can be a good detective and take note of what you have been in contact with.

If you are having problems tracking down your allergens you need to see your doctor. Your detective work will help your doctor to work out how to help you. He or she may do some tests to find out what is causing the problem.

> You may have a blood test where a small amount of blood is taken out of your arm and sent to a laboratory to be tested for reactions to different allergens so that you will know what to avoid in the future.

> You may have a skin prick test when tiny drops of different allergens are put onto your skin and then that place is gently pricked with a needle. If that allergen is a problem it shows up in a few minutes or a couple of days when the skin where the allergen was swells up a little and goes red.

> You may be put onto a strict diet when you are not allowed to eat anything that is not on a list. You have to keep a diary of what you eat and drink and any reactions you may have. Then as time goes on more foods are added until an allergen is found. This is called an elimination diet and challenge test.

> If you get sore itchy skin your doctor may do some patch testing. This is when patches which have common allergens like soap, perfume and rubber on them are stuck on your back. They are left there for a few days and checked to see if there has been an allergic reaction.

**Remember**

**Be Cool.** Don't panic

**Get Cool.** Cool your body down

**Stay Cool.** Rest. Don't overheat your body, sip water when you feel a bit better.

This is what some children wrote about allergies.
When you are sick you start to sneeze
Your eyes turn red and you cry and wheeze.
Your tongue can swell
And your throat as well
And your legs feel like lead.
You take your puffer
If it’s asthma you suffer.
Your throat can go all small and tight,
And if it swells you’ll look a sight!
So, avoid getting ill
See your doctor, take a pill
And get on with your life

By Elyse, age 10

“I have a lot of allergies but the worst one is mozzie bites. When I get bitten I usually swell up and itch. If I scratch the spots they start to bleed. I put a cloth over them and a bag of ice to stop the itch. If you use ice cubes in the cloth they start to melt and then it stings so it’s best to use an ice bag.”

“If you can handle it, use vinegar on the bite and it will feel better after a while.”

“If I wear non plastic band aids the sore underneath gets very puffy and pus comes out. It is very hard to get the band aid off then and the sore goes all red and gets little red spots round it.” - Maryke age 10

“I am allergic to penicillin and I get very sick. I have to wear a medi-alert bracelet.”

“I am allergic to bee stings. I have an epi-pen at school in the office if I need it.” - Joel

“Pollen makes me dizzy. Dust and the scent of some flowers make me sneeze.” - Carley age 10

Dr Kim says

“It can be hard to find out what is causing an allergy. Talk to your doctor and he may give you some skin tests so that you will know what is making you sick.”