

# Glossary of allergy terms

**Allergen** A substance that can cause an allergic reaction.

**Allergen immunotherapy** A series of injections (shots), sublingual drops or sublingual tablets are administered which contain allergens. Allergen immunotherapy alters the way in which the immune system reacts to allergens, by switching off allergy.

**Allergic salute** Wiping of an itchy, runny or blocked nose in an upwards direction that helps to open up the nasal airways.

**Allergic crease** A crease or pale line that develops across the lower part of the nose as a consequence of frequent upward wiping of the nose.

**Allergic reaction** An adverse reaction involving the immune system that is caused by inhaling, swallowing or touching a substance to which a person is sensitive. It can also follow injections of medicines, insect stings or insect bites.

**Allergic rhinitis** An inflammation of the lining of the nose caused by inhaling an allergen, such as dust mite, pollen or animal dander, and also by eating certain foods. Symptoms may include itching, sneezing, blocked nose, runny nose and itchy / watery eyes. Also called hay fever.

**Allergic shiners** Dark rings under the eyes caused by allergy. Bags under the eyes can also be caused by swelling of the tissues, thus reducing circulation and drainage.

**Atopic dermatitis** An inflammation of the skin that is reddened, swollen, itchy and often weeping (also known as atopic eczema).

**Anaphylaxis** This is the most severe type of allergic reaction involving many organs of the body such as the:

- skin – welts and hives (urticaria)
  - upper airways – swelling of the throat and vocal cords leading to obstruction in breathing
  - nose – sneezing, blocking, watering, runny nose
  - lungs – wheezing and asthma
  - circulatory system – a fall in blood pressure, persistent dizziness or collapse
- If untreated anaphylaxis may cause death. It is usually caused by food, medicines or insects a person has developed an allergy to.

**Antibodies** Substances produced by the body to protect itself against infection. Immunoglobulin E antibodies are produced by the body in an allergic reaction.

**Antihistamines** Medications that block the action of histamine. Non-sedating antihistamines relieve allergy symptoms and are readily available from pharmacies.

**Asthma** An allergic inflammation of the airways producing swelling, narrowing and the build-up of mucous, leading to difficulty in breathing.

**Bronchodilator** Medication that relaxes airway muscles and widens the air passages.

**Bronchospasm / wheezing** A high-pitched musical wheezing sound when breathing in or out. May be due to a number of causes, most commonly asthma. It cannot always be heard without a stethoscope.

**Contact dermatitis** An inflammation of the skin (blistered, red, itchy and often weeping) which is usually caused by contact with chemicals found in cosmetics, perfume, jewellery and clothing, as well as some plants.

**Desensitisation** Usually referred to as allergy shots or allergen immunotherapy (see allergen immunotherapy).

**Dust mite** A small mite invisible to the naked eye that is widely distributed in homes. It is a major cause of asthma and allergic rhinitis (hay fever).

**Eczema** An inflammation of the skin causing reddening, itching, swelling and weeping (also known as atopic dermatitis).

**Eosinophils** Cells that circulate in the blood and attack tissues at the site of an allergic reaction, causing damage.

**Food intolerance** An adverse reaction by the body to ingested foods or chemicals not involving the immune system.

**Food allergy** An adverse reaction to specific foods such as peanuts, tree nuts, shellfish, egg and milk, which involves the immune system.

**Food sensitivity** Another term for food allergy.

**Hay fever** Sneezing, watery discharge and itching of the nose and eyes caused by pollen of grasses and other plants, usually occurring in spring (also known as allergic rhinitis).

**Histamine** A substance occurring in mast cells in the body. In an allergic reaction it is one of the substances released which causes itching, sneezing, wheezing and runny nose and eyes.

**Hives** (see urticaria)

**Immune system** The immune system is a complex network of cells and proteins that defends the body against infection. Immunologists and allergy specialists identify and treat the diseases that result from abnormalities of the immune system.

**Immunotherapy** (see allergen immunotherapy)

**Immunoglobulin** (see antibodies)

**Inflammation** A defence reaction of tissues against invasion by foreign substances, which results in redness and swelling. In the condition of asthma, the inflammation is not defensive but destroys the tissues.

**Latex** Latex or natural rubber is the substance obtained from the sap of the *Hevea brasiliensis* tree.

**Mast cells** Specialised cells that lie just beneath the surface of the skin and the lining of the nose. They contain histamine and other substances, which cause allergy symptoms.

**Mould or fungus** Found everywhere in the environment and especially associated with rotting vegetable matter. Because many fungi multiply by releasing millions of spores into the air, they may cause allergy if inhaled.

**Mucus** A clear film of sticky liquid on the surface of the lining of the nose and lungs.

**Occupational allergens** Allergens encountered in the course of a person's work.

**Otitis media** Infection of the middle ear.

**Pollen** The pollen grain is a tiny particle carried by insects or wind to fertilise the female flower. Breathing in pollen causes allergic rhinitis (hay fever) and asthma in some people.

**RAST (RadioAllergoSorbent Test)**

A blood test for allergen-specific Immunoglobulin E (IgE) antibodies, which identifies reactions to specific allergens such as dust mite, pollen, animal dander, moulds, foods and some insect venoms – also referred to as allergen specific IgE tests.

**Seasonal allergic rhinitis** (see hay fever)

**Skin-prick test** A test to identify reactions to allergens. A positive test is one where a raised, itchy lump (wheal) surrounded by a flat red area (flare) develops within 15-20 minutes.