

Is your common cold actually a chronic allergy?



What on earth — or in the air — is making you sneeze?

There is still so much that the medical community doesn't understand about allergies. Why does your body attack a harmless substance, like dust, as though it was a deadly strain of flu? Why can your co-workers take a walk on a beautiful spring day, but you come back coughing and sneezing?

While someone with a cold can infect you, someone with a nasal allergy, also known as allergic rhinitis cannot. So, if you have nasal allergies, you don't have to worry about infecting a co-worker. You can't catch or transmit an allergy.

Because allergies usually come back again and again, you can become very self-conscious about symptoms that you feel are annoying to others, like sniffing, throat clearing or wheezing. You may even feel isolated because you have to skip outdoor activities with co-workers on high pollen days.

Whatever you experienced in the past is not a predictor of the future. Sometimes allergic reactions can be mild, but at other times they might be severe.

While you can't cure an allergy, you may be able to manage the symptoms if you reduce or eliminate exposure to the offending allergen.

It's important to start out by being your own detective. Use the chart on the next page to rule out the possibility of having a cold. Record your symptoms and see if you can connect them to any environmental conditions outside or in the office. You may also be allergic to more than one substance, so be patient and detailed when you keep records. When you meet with your healthcare provider, this kind of history may be extremely valuable in helping to determine what substances are triggering an allergic response.

Know the difference between colds and nasal allergies

Colds ¹	Nasal allergies ²
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> You can catch a cold from contact with someone else Your symptoms last until the virus runs its course It takes about three days from infection to when you have symptoms Can produce thick, yellow mucus Can be accompanied by fever and body aches You never know when or where you might be exposed to the germs that will cause a cold Catching one cold doesn't mean you'll catch a cold every time there are germs around you 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> You can't catch a nasal allergy from someone else with allergies Your symptoms will last as long as you're exposed to the allergen An allergic response will start as soon as you're in contact with the allergen Can produce clear mucus Symptoms don't include fever and body aches Symptoms return at the same time each year Once you have an allergic reaction to an allergen, it's likely you'll always have a reaction to the same allergen, although the symptoms and severity may change

Sources:

1. American Lung Association. Facts about the Common Cold, October 23, 2020. Available from www.lung.org.
2. Asthma and Allergy Foundation of America. Allergy Facts and Figures, April 2022. Available from www.aafa.org.

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