

WHAT'S UP DOC?

by Amy R. Beach, FNP

Q: Is all that sneezes a cold?

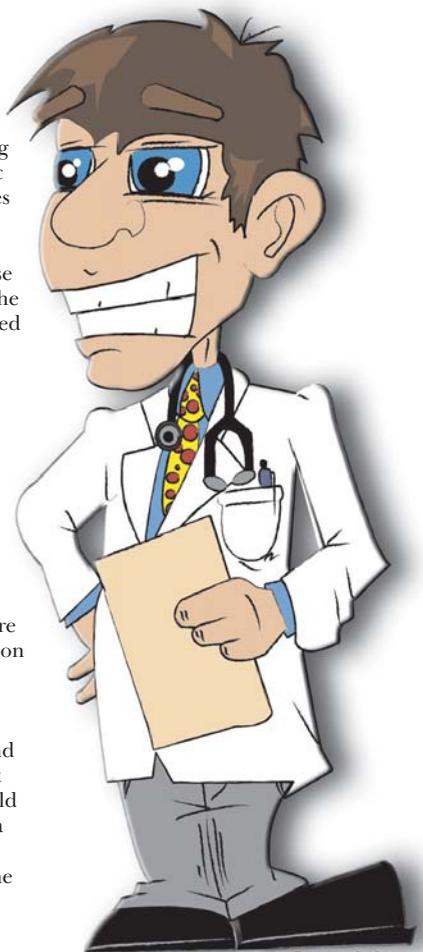
This is a very good question. And the answer is no, all that sneezes is not a cold. Often sneezing can be a sign of allergies where as sneezing from a cold or upper respiratory infection would most likely be caused by a virus. So how does one tell the difference? In some circumstances, it is very easy. For instance, if a child is around a cat and suddenly develops sneezing, a congested or clear runny nose and itchy, watery eyes, it is fairly obvious that the child is most likely allergic to cats. More often though, the situation is not so cut and dry.

Allergies are caused when a person's immune system identifies a protein substance as foreign or harmful and in response, the body releases a substance called histamine which causes symptoms such as nasal congestion and discharge, watery and itchy eyes, and sneezing. In severe cases, histamine can cause a life-threatening situation called anaphylaxis which can cause severe swelling and difficulty breathing. Other, though less obvious symptoms can also be present such as chronic postnasal drip, fatigue, personality changes such as irritability or hyperactivity, and stomach issues such as cramping or diarrhea.

When a child is experiencing multiple ear infections or has a chronic congested and/or runny nose or a chronic cough, allergies are sometimes suspected as an underlying cause. Particularly when the symptoms occur seasonally, meaning the same time each year. Sometimes, using medications aimed at treating allergies for a month can help to distinguish if allergies are the culprit. Antihistamines work by stopping the histamine response. Several effective oral antihistamines are available over the counter. Examples of these are Bendaryl, which is very effective but can cause drowsiness, or cetirizine (the generic form) that should not cause drowsiness. These work best when there is sneezing and eye symptoms along with nasal symptoms. Nasal steroid sprays, available by prescription only, are very effective when there are mostly nasal symptoms such as congestion, discharge and postnasal drip. They work by decreasing inflammation in the nose decreasing congestion and drainage. All these medications take several days to weeks to take full effect so if tried, they should be used for a full month before a decision is made as to whether they were effective.

In general, the most common allergies in children under five years of age are food products, where as children five years and older are more prone to have environmental allergies. The more common symptoms of food allergies tend to be rashes, nasal and stomach symptoms and in severe cases, anaphylaxis symptoms, where as environmental allergies typically do not cause skin or stomach symptoms. Examples of common food allergens are nuts, peanuts, milk, wheat, corn and soy. Common examples of environmental allergies would be pet dander, mold, dust and dust mites and pollens. If you suspect your child has a food allergy, you can test this by doing an elimination diet where you completely withhold the food from your child's diet and then give the food to your child in a fairly large quantity and observe if they have a reaction such as a rash or nasal symptoms. If a reaction occurs, an allergy is very possibly present and can be treated by either completely eliminating the food from the child's diet or allowing it in very small and infrequent amounts. The elimination test should never be done at home if there is a possibility of the child developing an anaphylactic reaction such as in the case of a very severe allergy to peanuts.

So, if you think your child might possibly have allergies, talk to you health care provider and here are some suggestions that might help you figure out what is really the cause of that sneeze!



Brian Johnson

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