

Ask an Allergist

Allergist Dr. Gower answers questions about allergies and asthma:

Can someone outgrow asthma?

No. Asthma is a chronic disease, which means that it doesn't go away once you have it and you are always at risk for symptoms. Some people think children outgrow asthma because they have fewer symptoms or attacks as they get older. But asthma causes changes in the lungs' airways. These changes don't go away and symptoms can return at any time. Even after a long time without symptoms, asthma can be triggered again. About one-third of children with asthma still have symptoms when they become adults.

Is it true that a blood test can diagnose an allergy?

Actually, the first steps in diagnosing allergies are a thorough health history and physical examination. Allergy tests, such as skin tests or blood tests, can help your allergist determine those factors that trigger your symptoms. If your doctor were to rely exclusively on the results of an allergy test without a history and physical examination, you could be inaccurately diagnosed as having an allergic problem that you don't actually have.

Allergists prefer using skin tests because:

- The results are available immediately.
- The testing is less expensive.
- The tests are more sensitive to subtle allergies.

Sometimes a blood test is appropriate, particularly when:

- You can't stop taking medication before having skin tests.
- You have a skin disease like eczema or psoriasis.
- You are so sensitive to an allergen that even a slight exposure could be risky.

How can I tell the difference between a cold and allergies?

The biggest clue in deciding whether symptoms like sneezing or a runny nose are a cold or allergies is how long they last. A cold normally lasts about a week, but allergies can last for several weeks or longer – depending on what you are allergic to and how often you are exposed to it.

Other differences include some of the symptoms. While both can cause a runny or stuffy nose, sneezing and wheezing, you are more likely to have itchy, watery eyes with allergies and get a fever or body aches with a cold. Another clue is your runny nose. If the drainage is clear, it's usually related to an allergy and not an infection.