



Common Health Conditions Series - Rhinitis (Part I)

Recognize Rhinitis

Rhinitis refers to an inflammation of the nasal passage, affecting about 20% of both adults and children. Its impact is not only limited to physical discomfort, but also medical complications, cost and quality of life. There are various types of rhinitis, as explained below:

Allergic Rhinitis

Allergic rhinitis is an inflammation of the nose as a result of breathing in or consuming allergens that trigger hypersensitive reactions. These allergens can range from environmental allergens like house dust mites, animal dander, cockroach, mold or pollen to food allergens such as milk, eggs, soy and nuts.

Seasonal Rhinitis

Seasonal rhinitis is allergic rhinitis whereby the allergen is not present whole year round, but only during certain season. This is most common for those whose rhinitis (hay

fever) is triggered by plant pollen as certain trees, plant or weed release higher pollen count during particular months of the year.

Non-allergic Rhinitis

Non-allergic rhinitis resembles allergic rhinitis, except that no allergen has been identified and without a pattern of seasonality. Therefore, sufferers of non-allergic rhinitis are likely to experience the symptoms all year round. They may be sensitive to environmental irritants such as perfume, haze, car fumes, cigarette smoke, detergent and chlorine. Other possible triggers are temperature and humidity of the air, hot spicy food, hormonal changes or drugs over-dose. Non-allergic rhinitis is increasingly common in adults.

The different types of non-allergic rhinitis are:

- **Infectious rhinitis** - also known as viral rhinitis. This is caused by an in-

fection, e.g. the common cold or flu.

- **Vasomotor rhinitis** - the blood vessels in the nose are too sensitive, leading to inflammation, congestion and excessive mucus discharge when exposed to triggers such as chemical irritants, perfumes, paint fumes, smoke, changes in humidity, sudden drop in temperature, consumption of alcohol, hot & spicy foods, etc.

- **Atrophic rhinitis** - the membranes inside the nose become thinner and harder, causing the nasal passages to widen and become drier. Crusts form inside the nose, some of them foul smelling. The patient can lose his/her sense of smell. This type of rhinitis may be a complication of nose surgery or an infection.

- **Rhinitis medicamentosa** - caused by over-use of nasal decongestants or after taking certain medications, such as aspirin etc.

Symptoms of Rhinitis

The symptoms of various types of rhinitis are similar, which include:

1. Sneezing
2. Nose that is (i) blocked/congested, (ii) runny or (iii) itchy
3. Eyes that are (i) watery, (ii) itchy, (iii) red, (iv) puffy or with (v) dark circles
4. Throat that is itchy
5. Ears that are clogged
6. Loss of smell
7. Cough, caused by postnasal drip
8. Headache
9. Fatigue or loss of sleep
10. Irritability

These symptoms often lead to increased medical leave, decreased productivity at work or reduced concentration in school, increased costs for consultation and treatment.

Rhinitis is often confused with **Cold vs Rhinitis** These symptoms progress gradually from one to the other as opposed to allergic rhinitis where the symptoms can occur suddenly due to immune system's over-reaction to the allergen, of which in most cases the mucus discharge is clear in color. While the virus in a cold is contagious, one cannot pass his/her rhinitis nor the hypersensitivity to certain triggers to another.

cold due to similar symptoms. The distinguishing feature of rhinitis versus a cold is that these symptoms persist longer for rhinitis. On the other hand, colds are due to respiratory tract infections and last for up to two weeks. The symptoms of cold usually start with nose congestion, runny nose and sneezing. As colds are due to viral infection, the



nasal mucus may become colored, accompanied by fever or cough.

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When do you suspect a Cold is Rhinitis?

Family history of allergic conditions and existing allergic conditions (such as asthma or eczema) indicate a higher likelihood of the persistent cold being rhinitis. Children in childcare centres may get colds a few times a year, therefore when unsure whether it is rhinitis or cold, it is best to see a physician. Allergy testing can be conducted to determine if there is any potential allergen that triggers the symptoms. As rhinitis doesn't go away like cold, it is advisable to seek treatment rather than suffer from a perpetual 'cold'!

Who is at Risk for Rhinitis?

Various factors are associated with an increased risk of rhinitis, as follow:

1. Children whose either one or both parents have an allergic condition.
2. Pre-existing allergic condition such as asthma or eczema.
3. Increased exposure to potential allergens or irritants increase the risk of rhinitis, for instance, exposure to air pollutants (cigarette smoke and fumes) or pet dander.
4. Increased exposure due to occupa-

tion, such as working with chemicals.

5. Age and hormonal changes, such as adult (for non-allergic rhinitis) and pregnancy.

Complications of Rhinitis

Various complications may arise from untreated rhinitis due to continued inflammation of the nasal passage. These complications include sinusitis, chronic ear infection, loss of smell, asthma, nasal polyps, obstructive sleep apnea (OSA) and nasopharyngeal cancer etc., many of which can seriously impact the quality of life and cause potential threats to health. For instance, OSA is often related to heart failure, heart attacks and the related death; on the other hand, studies done in China found out that 90% of nasopharyngeal cancer cases are due to prolonged untreated rhinitis. Therefore, even though rhinitis itself is not fatal, but some of its complications may be, it is indeed an illness not to be ignored, and early treatment is seriously advised.

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