SYMPTOM

Sneezing

Sneezing is a sudden reflex that forcefully clears irritants from the nose

WHAT IT FEELS LIKE
A sudden, forceful burst of air through nose and mouth

WHERE IT IS FELT
Nose and upper airway

MOST COMMON CAUSES
Colds, allergies, irritants such as smoke or perfume

WHEN IT IS URGENT
Trouble breathing or swelling of lips, tongue, or throat

USUALLY LASTS
Minutes with irritants; days or weeks with colds or allergies

SEE A DOCTOR IF
Persistent or worsening despite avoiding triggers and simple self-care

Overview

Sneezing is an automatic reflex that helps clear the nose. It usually begins when dust, mucus, allergens, or another substance irritates the lining inside your nose. Your body responds with a sudden burst of air through your nose and mouth.

An occasional sneeze is normal. Repeated sneezing is also common during a cold or an allergy flare. Sneezing itself is rarely a sign of a serious problem, but other symptoms occurring with it can be important.

The pattern may offer clues. Sneezing that starts around animals, pollen, or dust may suggest an allergy. Sneezing with a sore throat and cough is more consistent with a respiratory infection. Strong smells, smoke, cold air, or sudden bright light can also trigger sneezing without an infection or allergy.

What it may feel or look like

Before a sneeze, you may notice tickling, itching, or irritation inside your nose. Your eyes may close automatically as you sneeze. Some people sneeze once, while others have several sneezes in a row.

Other symptoms depend on the cause:

Rhinitis means inflammation or irritation inside the nose. It can be caused by allergies, infections, weather changes, medicines, or other triggers.

- Allergies may cause an itchy nose, watery eyes, and clear nasal discharge
- A cold may cause congestion, sore throat, cough, tiredness, or a mild fever
- Irritants may cause sudden sneezing that improves after you leave the area
- Non-allergic rhinitis may cause congestion or a runny nose without itching

Common causes

Respiratory infections are a frequent cause. Colds and other viral infections irritate the nose and throat. Sneezing may be strongest early in the illness and then improve as the infection clears.

Allergic rhinitis , sometimes called hay fever, happens when your immune system reacts to something that is usually harmless. Common triggers include pollen, dust mites, animal dander, and mould. Symptoms may occur during certain seasons or continue throughout the year.

Airborne irritants can trigger the sneezing reflex without causing an allergy. Examples include tobacco smoke, air pollution, perfume, cleaning fumes, and dusty air. Symptoms often begin soon after exposure.

Non-allergic rhinitis can be triggered by cold or dry air, weather changes, exercise, spicy food, or hormonal changes. Some medicines can also contribute to nasal symptoms.

Some people sneeze when they move suddenly into bright light. This is called the photic sneeze reflex. It tends to run in families and is not usually harmful.

Less common causes include inflammation from nasal growths, ongoing sinus problems, or an object inside the nose. A foreign object is more likely in a young child, especially if there is foul-smelling discharge from only one nostril.

When to seek medical care

Sneezing alone usually does not require urgent care.

Call emergency services if sneezing occurs with trouble breathing, wheezing, faintness, or swelling of the lips, tongue, face, or throat. These may be signs of a severe allergic reaction. If you have been prescribed an adrenaline auto-injector for severe allergies, follow your

emergency plan.

Seek urgent medical advice after a significant chemical exposure, particularly if you also have breathing difficulty, chest tightness, severe eye irritation, or vomiting. Move away from the fumes if you can do so safely.

A suspected button battery or strong magnet inside the nose needs immediate medical attention. Do not try to remove it yourself.

Book a routine appointment if sneezing:

A clinician can also help if over-the-counter treatments are not working or are causing unwanted effects.

- Continues for several weeks or keeps returning
- Disrupts sleep, school, work, or daily activities
- Does not improve after avoiding likely triggers
- Occurs with ongoing facial pressure, reduced smell, or nasal blockage
- Comes with one-sided, bloody, or foul-smelling nasal discharge

How the cause is found

A clinician will usually ask when the sneezing began, how often it occurs, and whether it follows a pattern. Tell them about possible triggers, such as seasons, animals, dust, work exposures, new medicines, or strong smells.

Associated symptoms are useful. Itching and watery eyes can point toward an allergy. Fever, sore throat, and cough may fit an infection. Symptoms limited to one side of the nose may need closer examination.

The clinician may look inside your nose and examine your throat, ears, breathing, or skin. Most people do not need tests. Allergy skin or blood tests may be considered when the trigger is unclear or when symptoms are persistent. Imaging is not usually needed for uncomplicated sneezing.

Treatment and self-care

Treatment depends on what is causing the sneezing.

For a cold, rest, fluids, and time are often enough. Antibiotics like amoxicillin or doxycycline do not treat viral colds. Cover sneezes with a tissue or your elbow, wash your hands, and avoid

close contact when you are unwell.

For possible allergies, reducing exposure can help. Keep windows closed when pollen is high, wash bedding regularly, and avoid allowing animals into the bedroom if they trigger symptoms. Complete avoidance is not always possible.

Saline nasal sprays or rinses can wash pollen, mucus, and irritants from the nose. If making a rinse, use sterile, distilled, or previously boiled and cooled water. Clean the device after use.

Antihistamines like cetirizine or loratadine can help allergy-related sneezing and itching. Some cause drowsiness. Nasal corticosteroid sprays reduce inflammation and may help persistent allergic symptoms, but they usually work best when used regularly and correctly. Ask a pharmacist or clinician which option is suitable for you, and follow the label.

Decongestant nasal sprays are intended for short-term relief. Using them for too long can make congestion return or worsen. They do not treat the underlying allergy.

Avoid smoke and strongly scented products when possible. If a workplace substance seems to trigger symptoms, report it through the appropriate workplace health or safety process.

What to expect

Sneezing caused by dust, perfume, or another brief exposure may settle within minutes after you move away from the trigger.

With a cold, sneezing often improves over several days as the infection settles. Allergy-related sneezing may continue while you are exposed to the allergen and return during certain seasons.

Persistent symptoms can often be controlled once the pattern and likely trigger are understood. Follow up routinely if symptoms change, become one-sided, or remain disruptive despite appropriate self-care.

Common questions

Is frequent sneezing always an allergy?

No. Colds, smoke, strong smells, weather changes, and non-allergic rhinitis can all cause repeated sneezing. Itching and watery eyes make an allergy more likely, but they do not confirm it.

Can sneezing spread infections?

Sneezing can release respiratory droplets. Use a tissue or sneeze into your elbow, then wash or

sanitise your hands. Improving ventilation and keeping some distance from others can also reduce spread when you are ill.

Should I hold in a sneeze?

It is better not to block your nose and mouth forcefully. Sneeze into a tissue or your elbow instead. This contains droplets without creating unnecessary pressure in your nose and throat.

Why do I sneeze in bright sunlight?

Some people have an inherited photic sneeze reflex. A sudden change to bright light triggers the nerves involved in sneezing. Wearing sunglasses may reduce the trigger.

Sources

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