Exposure to allergens can result in the release of histamine in the body, leading to symptoms that may include a frequent or chronic cough. Although an allergic cough is not contagious, it can result in sleep disturbances, cause physical tiredness, dizziness, hoarseness, sweating, muscle strain and leaking urine (especially in women), and can be embarrassing. This article will discuss the symptoms and treatment options for an allergic cough.

**How to identify an allergic cough**

When patients with allergies are exposed to allergens (otherwise harmless substances in the environment such as dust or pollen), a cough can be produced in any of the following ways:

- Irritation of the nasal passages increases the production of a watery mucus resulting in a postnasal drip leading to a cough.
- Tightening of the airways with wheezing that results in an asthma attack with coughing.
- Inflammation or swelling of the bronchial tubes in the lung (bronchitis) that produces a clear or white mucus can result in a chronic productive cough.

Cough that is associated with exposure to a specific allergen may be associated with other signs and symptoms of an allergy such as:

- Sneezing
- Itchy nose
- Runny or stuffy nose
- Sensation of liquid in the back of the throat
- Poor sense of taste or smell
- Sinus pain or pressure
- Watery or itchy eyes

Patients with an allergic cough do not present with a fever or body aches but other symptoms typically continue for longer than eight weeks.

**How to manage an allergic cough**

If the cause of the allergy is known, it is best to avoid the allergen whenever possible in order to prevent symptoms. For example, patients allergic to pollen should try and stay indoors when pollen counts are high. Changing clothes and taking a shower after being outdoors can also assist in reducing symptoms by removing the allergens. Using saline nose drops regularly will help to wash out allergens and reduce an allergic cough.

It is not always possible to avoid allergens and then patients may need medication to control symptoms. Nasal sprays containing glucocorticoids such as beclomethasone, fluticasone or mometasone are available over-the-counter (OTC) in South Africa. They reduce nasal inflammation and postnasal drip and help to relieve the cough.

Second-generation antihistamines are also effective for treatment of an allergic postnasal drip and are less likely to cause sedation. Cetirizine, levocetirizine, loratadine, desloratadine, and fexofenadine are available OTC. Antihistamine nasal sprays may also be recommended, and available products include sprays containing azelastine and levocabastine.

Treatment may start with one of the above-mentioned options, but if needed they can also be used in combination.

Patients suffering from asthma or chronic bronchitis may need to use a bronchodilator such as salbutamol to open the airways and often need regular use of inhaled corticosteroids such as budesonide to control the underlying inflammation.
"Patients suffering from asthma or chronic bronchitis may need to use a bronchodilator such as salbutamol to open the airways..."

Decongestant nasal sprays such as pseudoephedrine and phenylephrine are effective in reducing postnasal drip to stop a cough, but these should not be used for longer than three to five days as they can cause rebound nasal congestion.

**Conclusion**

Patients presenting in the pharmacy with a cough need to be counselled in order to establish the cause as that will determine treatment. Patients with a cough lasting longer than eight weeks and other symptoms of allergies may be treated with a nasal spray containing cortisone, a second-generation oral antihistamine or combination of both. Patients that experience asthmatic symptoms or allergic type bronchitis may benefit from using bronchodilators and inhalers containing cortisone.

**Bibliography**