Sneezing, runny nose, itchy eyes, hives, swelling and shortness of breath are among the common symptoms experienced by those who suffer from allergies. It is estimated that over 40 million Americans have allergies. Although children and young adults seem to be affected most, people of all ages can have or develop allergies at any point in their life. Educating oneself about allergies as well as documenting when allergic reactions occur can help someone recognize what triggers their allergies.

What is an allergic reaction?
An allergic reaction is a response to a substance (allergen) that generally does not cause harm. When an allergen enters the body, the immune system responds to the perceived invader by producing the chemical histamine, which causes symptoms associated with allergies.

What are the symptoms of an allergic reaction?
Symptoms of an allergic reaction can range from mild to severe and may include one or more of the following:

• Sneezing
• Itchy/watery eyes
• Wheezing or troubled breathing
• Coughing
• Runny nose
• Congestion
• Skin rashes/hives
• Headache
• Fatigue
• Abdominal pain, diarrhea, nausea, or vomiting

What are the most common allergens?
• Pollen
• Mold
• Dust mites
• Animal/pet dander and saliva
• Latex
• Insect venom
• Certain foods
• Chemicals, including drugs

Tips for controlling environmental allergies
• Keep windows and doors closed during allergy season.
• Use a good air filter in the home and change it every month. Stay indoors during the pollen season.
• Keep your residence especially clean during pollen season to help reduce levels of pollen and mold.
• Wear a pollen mask when mowing the lawn, raking the leaves, or cleaning the house.
• Do not allow pets in the bedroom.
• Use a dust-proof encasement on mattresses and pillows.
• Kill dust mites with high heat (i.e., put blankets, pillows, etc., into the dryer for 30 minutes every two weeks.
• Perform a nasal rinse.

Nasal rinse
If you have allergies, a stuffy nose, or sinus infection, nasal rinsing can help moisten the lining of your nose, wash out dust and allergens, and clear out mucus.

• Recipe: 1/4 teaspoon salt, 1/4 teaspoon baking soda, dissolved in 1 cup warm distilled water. Lean forward and gently squirt the water into your nose. Use a squeeze bottle, syringe, dropper, or sniff water from your cupped hand. Gently blow your nose and then repeat. Use the rinse as often as you like, but 3-4 times a day is a good start to relieve your symptoms. For babies, you can ease a stuffy nose by carefully putting 1 or 2 drops in a nostril, waiting a minute, and then using a bulb syringe to gently suck out the mucus.

How can allergies be treated?
Some allergies can be treated with over-the-counter (OTC) or prescription medications. If symptoms persist or if side effects from these products are experienced, a visit with a health care provider is recommended. Medications used to treat allergies may include:

1. Antihistamines
• Counteract histamine, an inflammatory substance released when the immune system encounters an allergen.
• OTC - Diphenhydramine (Benadryl), Loratadine (Claritin), Fexofenadine (Allegra), Lecocentrizine (Xyzal) - Cetirizine (Zyrtec)
2. Decongestants
- Reduces swelling and sinus congestion
- Available in liquid, tablet, and nasal spray both with and without a prescription (i.e. sudafed)
- Usually used in combination with antihistamines
- Note: Do not use OTC nasal sprays for more than 2-3 consecutive days because “rebound” congestion may occur.

3. Corticosteroids
- Helps control symptoms of allergies and asthma by reducing inflammation
- Can be taken by inhalation, injection, or orally
- Nasal Spray - Triamcinolone (Nasacort), Budesonide (Rhinocort), Fluticasone (Fionase)

4. Eye drops
- Help relieve itchy eyes
- Available with or without a prescription

What causes hives?
Hives and angioedema are triggered when the cells that line the blood vessels in the skin release histamine and other chemicals into the bloodstream and skin. Other causes of hives and angioedema include:

- Allergens (e.g., pollen, animal dander, latex, insect stings)
- Foods (e.g., shellfish, nuts, fish, eggs, milk)
- Medications (e.g., penicillin, aspirin, ibuprofen, angiotensin-converting enzyme inhibitors, antibiotics containing sulfa and opiates)
- Physical factors (e.g., heat, cold, sunlight, water, pressure on skin, emotional stress, exercise)
- Dermatographism (welts along lines where scratched or stroked)
- Body’s response to the production of antibodies

Can allergies be cured?
Although allergies cannot be cured, reactions to allergens may be reduced with immunotherapy. Immunotherapy involves injections (allergy shots) that containing small amounts of allergens that are given on a set schedule over a period of time. The goal of immunotherapy is to decrease the body’s sensitivity to specific allergens. An allergy skin test or blood test must be conducted prior to immunotherapy. These tests are used to help determine whether or not one has an allergy, and to identify the specific substance causing an allergic reaction. An allergist, or doctor who specializes in allergy problems and asthma, will interpret the test results and determine an appropriate treatment.

What are hives?
Hives are red, elevated, itchy welts of various sizes. They appear and disappear on the surface of the skin. Angioedema is similar to hives except it causes deeper welts in the skin, especially near the eyes and lips. The hands, feet, and inside of the throat may also be affected.

What are the signs and symptoms of hives?
Acute hives can last or less than a day or up to six weeks, and chronic hives usually last for more than six weeks. Angioedema and hives often occur together. Signs of hives may include:

- Elevated, red, itchy welts of various sizes
- Welts that occur where clothes rub the skin
- Welts that tend to occur in batches

What is the treatment for hives?
The standard treatment for hives and angioedema is antihistamines which may include:

1. Non-prescription medications
   - Diphenhydramine (Benadryl)
   - Loratadine (Claritin, Alavert)
   - Fexofenadine (Allegra)
   - Cetirizine (Zyrtec)
2. Prescription medications
   - Prednisone
   - Methylprednisolone (Medrol)

Note: If a severe attack of hives or angioedema is experienced, a trip to the emergency room is necessary.

References
- Mayo Clinic
- Oklahoma Allergy Clinic