Do you feel uncomfortable trying to manage your food allergies at work? Are you self-conscious turning down a slice of a co-worker’s birthday cake because you have an egg allergy? Do you think only children should have peanut allergies? Do you avoid going out to eat with colleagues because you don’t want to ask the waiter about ingredients?

Allergies are considered a chronic condition. If you’re allergic to dust, your body will always have an allergic reaction to dust. If you have seasonal allergies, you’re likely to feel sick every time your body is exposed to tree or grass pollen.

This may not seem logical: shouldn’t repeated exposure build up a tolerance to the allergen (substances that trigger an allergic reaction)? Think of it this way: if you caught a lot of colds every year, would you hope that one day your body would see a cold virus and think, “I won’t fight this off … this appears to be an old friend.” Not a chance—you want your immune system to fight every cold germ it encounters.

Your immune system fights allergens in the same way it fights bacteria, viruses and toxins: once it identifies something as a dangerous substance, it will remember that unwelcome invader and fight it each time it shows up.

The allergic cycle or “cascade” is still a mystery. We don’t know why your immune system sees a harmless substance as an invader. We don’t know why your allergic reactions may vary in severity—mild on one occasion and severe (even life threatening) on another occasion.