

The Nose Knows: Allergy Season Is Underway

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Nancy K. Crevier

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Spring is in the air, and for allergy sufferers, that is not necessarily good news.

It does not matter where one goes. Allergens are found in every climate. Nearly 50 millions people suffer from seasonal allergies, according to the American College of Allergy, Asthma, and Immunology (ACAAI).

Seasonal rhinitis, or “hay fever” (even though it does not often involve hay or a fever), is the body’s abnormal reaction to pollen. Seen as an unwanted invader, the body produces antibodies, which attach to certain white blood cells. Future exposure means that those antibodies are ready to fight. The cells burst, releasing huge amounts of histamine into the system and — allergy symptoms go wild.

Nasal membranes become irritated and the nose runs in response to the histamines. Eyes become watery and itchy, and as the excess mucous builds up, it drains down the back of the throat, causing a bothersome cough. Symptoms vary in severity from person to person, and from year to year.

It is the time of year when people are most apt to be outdoors that large amounts of pollen are being released from trees, grasses, and other plants that rely on the wind to carry the grains about. One ragweed plant, for example, can release one million grains of pollen every day. Those grains are carried for miles.

Two area doctors offered different options for attending to the debilitating symptoms of seasonal allergies.

Dr Richard Lee of Advanced Specialty Care in Danbury/New Milford, and Chief of Allergy and Asthma Department at Danbury Hospital, said that being aware of what an individual’s allergy

triggers are, and when seasonal pollens are likely to be highest, can help formulate the best way to combat symptoms.

His practice has already seen an influx of the highly sensitive allergy patients in the past month, and expects that the next week or two will see a huge increase in the number of people seeking treatment for seasonal allergies.

“There is a ‘priming effect’ the first couple of weeks of the season,” Dr Lee said, “and not a whole lot of symptoms. Then, it takes off.”

Tree pollen season in this area is typically mid-March to June, said Dr Lee, with grasses from May to July, and ragweed from August to the first frost.

“Don’t wait until you have symptoms” to begin treatment for seasonal allergies, he said. Most of the over-the-counter (OTC) medications recommended, such as Zyrtec or Claritin, need several days to two weeks to be most effective, as do the nasal steroids like Nasacort, now available without a prescription.

There is no typical allergy patient, Dr Lee said, but there has been an increase in the number of people with allergies. A late 1960s study at Brown University reported 12 to 13 percent of freshmen with seasonal allergies. That study, repeated 30 years later, showed a 9 to 10 percent increase of allergy sufferers.

Genetics can play a part in who gets allergies, Dr Lee said.

“If one parent has seasonal allergies, there is a 30 percent chance a child will,” he said. That number jumps to a 90 percent chance of developing allergies if both parents have allergies.

The environment can contribute to the likelihood of developing allergies, and not always because of toxins or air pollution. The overly clean environment in which so many American children are raised exposes them to fewer pollens and bacteria early on, he said, with less stimulation of the immune system that protects the body from allergens.

Most people with allergies are diagnosed before age 25, said Dr Lee, but allergies can develop for the first time at any age.

When allergies do not respond to OTC medications, or complications such as sinusitis or asthma accompany allergies, it is time to see an allergist. Shots or oral allergy therapies use the immune system to regulate the body's reaction to pollens, he said.

"They can heal the system, and reduce the medications needed, over time," Dr Lee said. An allergist can also help patients determine the best times to start and stop medications.

The Boogie Man Effect

Naturopathic physician Dr Shawn Carney, of Northeast Natural Medicine, in Newtown, said that despite rumors that the 2014 season will be worse than usual, so far he has not seen an indication in his practice of an increase in complaints.

"I think it's like the Boogie Man we have before every winter: it will be the worst. If [this allergy season is worse than usual] I haven't seen it yet," he said.

However, Dr Carney did say that allergy complaints appear to be on the uptick, overall, in the last several years. There could be many reasons for that, he said, including that as the body ages, changes set in. It is possible for someone who has never had bothersome allergies in the past to suddenly find that he or she is uncomfortable.

Environmental toxins and immune systems sensitized by overexposure to potential allergens can be the culprits. Food allergies or sensitivities can create a compromised system that is pushed over the edge when more allergens, such as seasonal pollens, are introduced.

Recent research, which is rather controversial, said Dr Carney, indicates that vaccines are part of the picture as to why more people are exhibiting allergy symptoms.

"The number of vaccinations people receive now has increased," said Dr Carney, and those vaccines may over stimulate the TH2 pathway (part of the immune system's messenger and relay network) and set up a pre-inflammatory predisposition. "That sets the stage for other inflammatory pathways," he said.

There are ways to alleviate the symptoms of seasonal allergies, regardless of why they occur. Dietary habits that keep the body's immune system strong year around can decrease allergy symptoms. The more antioxidants and bioflavonoids (found in deeply colored fruits and

vegetables) in a diet, the more symptoms can be kept in check, he said. Dr Carney also recommended supplementing the body's supply of quercetin and vitamin C, and enzymes such as bromaline "to quench the cascade of mast cells" causing unpleasant allergic reactions.

Homeopathic, or energetic, medicines can help to reduce the allergic response, as well, as can essential oil treatment under the supervision of a naturopathic doctor.

One thing any seasonal allergy sufferer should not be without, urged Dr Carney, is a Neti Pot system for washing out the sinuses.

"It's a huge, huge relief [for allergy patients]," he said.

Support The Immune System

Supporting the body's natural defense system without the use of OTC or conventional prescription allergy medications, said Dr Carney, has the advantage in that there are no long term effects in the body, and no rebound effects. "You're not suppressing the immune system in any way," he said.

Dr Lee does not recommend the older, "first generation" medications, including Benedryl and Dimetapp.

"They have a lot of side effects. Benedryl, for instance blocks short term memory formations for up to 12 hours," he said. Now in the third generation of prescription and OTC drugs, there are far fewer side effects. Rebound effects, in which symptoms return with a vengeance when medication is stopped, are not likely to happen with modern allergy medications, he said.

Practical ways to decrease allergy symptoms should also be utilized, according to ACAAI.

Pollen count tends to be at its peak early in the day, so plan outdoor activities for later on.

Keep the windows and doors shut to the house, and run the air conditioner. (Dr Carney cautioned that air conditioner filters must be cleaned or changed regularly to be effective.) That goes ditto for the car. It is a nice time of year to roll down the windows and enjoy the warm breeze, but it is an invitation to every passing pollen grain to come on in.

Consider wearing a mask when doing yard work or mowing the lawn.

The scent of clothing dried by the rays of the sun and gentle winds is an idyllic thought. Hang on, though, before hanging out clothing to dry. Pollen loves to attach to the cloth. A deep breath of clean clothing dried in the fresh air is likely to bring on a sneezing fit for anyone with seasonal allergies.

Showering, washing hair (particularly important at bedtime, when pollen dusted hair can leave residue on the pillow, Dr Lee noted), and washing clothing after extended periods of time outdoors is recommended to alleviate allergy symptoms.

“Work preventively,” Dr Lee urged, so that allergies are kept under control, not out of control.

Pollen triggers immune reaction

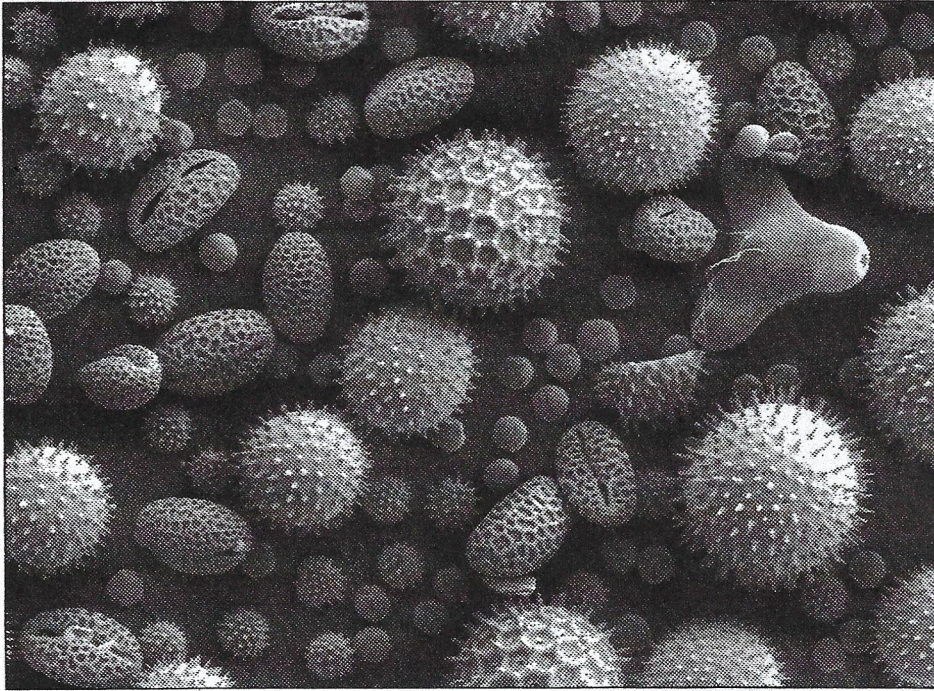
Pollen is a dry, lightweight, fine powder released from trees, grass, and weeds. It's carried by the wind and can enter in a person's eyes, nose, lungs and skin.

The immune system treats the pollen as an invader and reacts by producing large amounts of antibodies to defend the small invaders.

Histamines are inflammatory chemicals the body releases when pollen and antibodies collide. This allergic reaction can cause symptoms such as itchy watery eyes, runny nose, itchy throat, hives, fatigue and irritability.

Source: IMS Health / pollen.com, graphic by Christine Elisague/American Observer

It is nature's enthusiastic desire to reproduce that has trees, grasses, and other plants spewing enormous numbers of pollen grains in the spring, setting off a reaction that can result in irritated noses, eyes, and throats for allergy sufferers.



These beautiful, shell-like shapes are actually various types of pollen grains, magnified many times over.