

Lifestyle Changes And Intervention Fight Seasonal Allergies

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NANCY CREVIER

It is hardly news to report that spring allergy season is in full force. The more than 40 million allergy sufferers around the country are well aware of that fact. The heavy snow of the past winter and relentless rain and wind that has pounded the East Coast and other areas of the country have created conditions in which tree pollen is profuse, and the release of the pollen has carried through an extended period of time.

“The bucket is overflowing,” said Newtown naturopathic doctor Shawn Carney. “The trees are very fertile right now,” he said, and that has led to an increased number of patients seeking solutions to relieve earaches, sinus problems, sore throats, and itchy eyes. Even patients who normally react only to autumn conditions are finding that the spring of 2011 is causing health problems.

According to the Asthma and Allergy Foundation of America, an allergy is “an overreaction of the human immune system to a foreign protein substance that is eaten, breathed into the lungs, injected, or touched. This immune overreaction can result in symptoms such as coughing, sneezing, itchy eyes, runny nose and scratchy throat.”

No one hundred percent cure for allergies exists, and because allergies have a genetic component, it is nearly impossible for some individuals to escape the wrath of the seasons. If one parent has allergies, the chances are one in three that each child will have an allergy. If both parents have allergies, the chances that children will also have allergies greatly increase. However, allergies can be controlled.

As a naturopathic doctor, Dr Carney believes in the body’s ability to heal itself through proper nutrition and life-style changes, augmented by certain vitamins and supplements.

The problem is mucous, and how the body handles it. Mucous is the body's way of responding to allergens and clearing them from the body. But the immune system can only handle so much, said Dr Carney, and the increased mucous production also provides an environment in which "opportunistic infections can take advantage." That is how secondary infections complicate allergies.

Fighting allergy symptoms is a year-round effort that begins with looking at ways to decrease inflammation in the body, said Dr Carney. "We look at food sensitivities. Often we find that when we pull that food out of the diet, the situation is resolved," he said. Spring allergy sufferers may want to begin seeking solutions as early as February. He suggested having IgG blood testing for food sensitivities, that are more sensitive to delayed reactions, rather than the conventionally used IgE allergy testing that tends to focus more on the anaphylactic reaction of the body to allergens. Frequently, avoiding arachadonic acid-containing foods, such as dairy products and meat, decrease mucous production, and thus allergic responses.

It is important to get to the root of the imbalance when fighting allergies, he said. "The body has an inherent wisdom [about its healthy state] and we just need to do some detective work to find out where the imbalance is," Dr Carney said.

Typically, in addition to food sensitivity testing, Dr Carney recommends supplements like vitamin C and quercetin to stop mass cells from breaking apart and creating more mucous. Digestive enzymes, such as bromelain and papain, decrease inflammation. Individual needs differ, of course, so treatment can vary.

Simple lifestyle changes can help during allergy season, as well, said Dr Carney. "If you exercise, exercise indoors during allergy season – so long as you dust," he suggested. Keep windows closed overnight. "Opening windows for comfort is desirable this time of year, but you are inviting 'guests' you don't want – pollen – inside," Dr Carney said. Closing the windows, especially between 5 and 10 am when pollen counts are highest can minimize symptoms until the environment decides to settle down.

Dr Carney said he would not be surprised to find that autumn allergy sufferers find that symptoms are also more severe and long lasting than previous years. Fine-tuning the immune system beginning this summer would not be a bad idea, he said.

Remedies

Dr Richard Lee, of Advanced Allergy and Asthma Care in Danbury and head of allergy and immunology at Danbury Hospital, said that at this point, with only about three to four weeks left of the spring allergy season, sufferers should turn to antihistamines like Allegra or Zyrtec to alleviate symptoms. "It's late to treat at this point," said Dr Lee. Most conventional allergy treatments, including steroid-based nasal sprays, take at least two weeks to work effectively. Nonsteroidal nasal sprays can take even longer.

This spring has been, in a word, miserable, said Dr Lee, and it is tree pollen that is the culprit. Birch, beech, maple, and oak tree pollen – all plentiful in the Newtown area – cause the most misery, because they produce light pollens that float easily on the breeze. "People think that it is the flowering trees [that cause allergies], like the lilacs and magnolias, and other blooming trees, but those pollens are heavier and not as likely to be wind-dispersed," he said. The lighter tree pollens can drift for up to ten miles, he said, so ridding one's property of those trees is futile in combating allergy symptoms.

Allergy sufferers got a break last year, with a drier spring that reduced the pollen count, and people forgot how horrible spring allergies could be. That is why this season, which has a more normal pollen count, seems worse.

The pollen count is predicted through the collection of pollen that falls on a slide during a 24-hour period. Local collection points this spring have been in Bridgeport and Waterbury, and show ten times the amount of pollen from last year. In 2010, the spring pollen count was 400 to 500; this year, that count is 5,000, he said.

"Ocular [eye] symptoms have been extremely intense this season," Dr Lee said. Over the counter eye drops can relieve symptoms. "Refrigerate the eye drops," recommended Dr Lee. Cold eye drops are more soothing, and cause less stinging.

If allergies are only seasonal, he recommends treating them conservatively, and recommends year around treatments like shots only if symptoms become extended, or if asthma symptoms present.

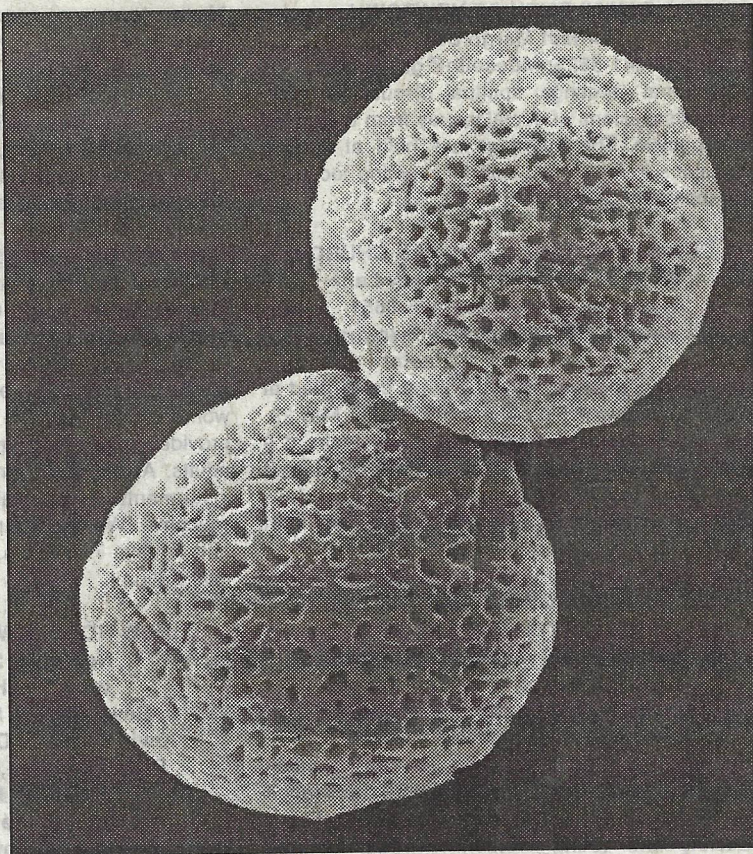
Certain foods can cross-react with tree pollens, making those with food sensitivities more miserable, but Dr Lee has not seen great success with supplements protecting allergy sufferers from reactions. "There have been some good studies with quercetin, for its anti-inflammatory

properties," he said. He cautioned, however, that quercetin should be taken under a physician's advisement, as it can interfere with the efficacy of other medications.

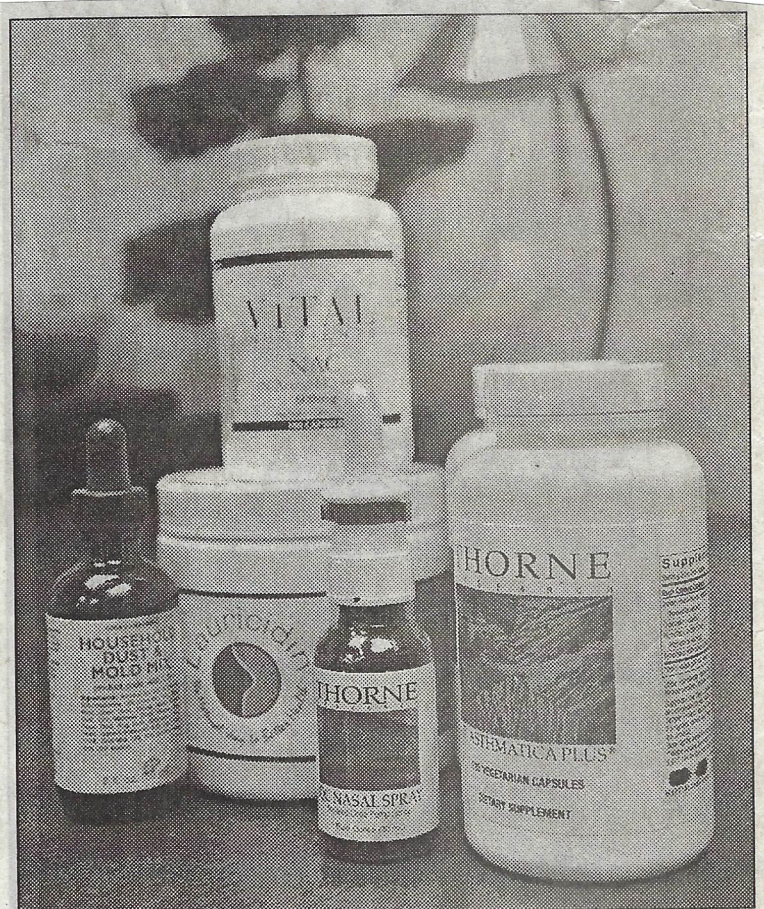
Lifestyle changes while allergy season is in full swing can help, said Dr Lee. Along with keeping bedroom windows closed during peak pollen times, a bedtime shower can wash pollen from the hair. "When pollen gets on the pillow from your hair, you are breathing it in all night long," he said, negating the effect of closed windows.

A window air-conditioner is as good as a HEPA filter air cleaner, said Dr Lee. Not only will it assist in decreasing the amount of pollen coming into a room, but if it is a warm summer night and windows are closed, the air-conditioner provides a cooling option. "Just be sure to change the filter in the air-conditioner, monthly," he said.

New England will always have trees, and trees will always produce pollen. If pollen is ruining your spring, lifestyle changes and a visit to the doctor might bring relief. If nothing else, be glad that Newtown, unlike Knoxville, Tenn., Louisville, Ky., Charlotte, N.C., Jackson, Miss., and Chattanooga, Tenn., is not one of the Asthma and Allergy Foundation of America's "2011 Spring Allergy Capitals."



It is primarily tree pollen from birch, beech, maple, and oak trees carried on the wind that is creating a miserable spring season for allergy sufferers, says Danbury Hospital chief of allergy and immunology, Dr Richard Lee. Pollen counts for the area this spring have been ten times higher than a year ago, but are actually in the normal range this year, he said.



Dr Shawn Carney, ND, of Northeast Natural Medicine in Newtown, recommends supplements that can boost the immune system and reduce inflammation to combat seasonal allergies, based on a patient's individual symptoms.

—Bee Photo, Crevier