

Don't let allergy symptoms dampen autumn's splendor

Just when seasonal allergy sufferers thought it was safe to go back outside, along comes the season of autumn. In addition to crisp, cool temperatures, changing leaves, and shorter days, autumn brings with it various airborne allergens that trigger a constellation of unpleasant symptoms, such as sniffing, sneezing, itching, and wheezing, in sensitive individuals. The good news is, with the appropriate treatment under an allergist's care, seasonal allergy sufferers can, once again, appreciate autumn for its natural splendor rather than dread it for the misery it brings.

According to board-certified allergist/immunologist Dr. Ghassan Safadi, the main culprit in triggering fall allergy symptoms is ragweed pollen, which is prevalent throughout the US and takes to the air from mid-August until the first hard frost. Other weed pollens are also in the mix, and the harvesting of crops such as soybeans, alfalfa, and corn contributes to the problem, as well.

In addition to weed pollens, airborne mold spores cause more than their fair share of misery in autumn, both indoors and outdoors. "Heavy rain and falling leaves lead to bigger issues with outdoor mold. In fact, those black spots you see on fallen leaves are actually a special type of mold called *Alternaria*, which is known to trigger allergy and asthma symptoms," observes Dr. Safadi. Indoors, mold can become a problem in areas of high humidity or where water has leaked or infiltrated. Damp basements and bathrooms are among the most common breeding grounds for indoor mold, though it can proliferate in any room of the house where conditions are conducive.

An allergic response is essentially a case of mistaken identity. When people with allergies are exposed to an allergen to which they are sensitive, their body reacts as if it is being invaded by a substance that can cause illness. To eradicate this "foreign invader," the body releases antibodies, which attack the allergens and cause certain cells in the body to release chemicals called histamines into the blood stream. It's these histamines that cause the familiar, unpleasant symptoms of an allergic reaction.

Dr. Safadi notes that as the fall season progresses, some people with allergies may start to experience an increase in their symptoms despite the fact that the pollen count is actually decreasing. This phenomenon is attributed to the "priming effect," which essentially means that less pollen is needed to trigger an allergic response because the body's cells are already "primed" to release histamine.

The first line of defense against autumn allergens is avoidance. "I advise my patients that pollen counts tend to be highest in the morning and evening and lower at mid-day. So, it's best to attend to outdoor activities, such as doing yard work, in the middle of the day. Also, keep in mind that pollen counts increase when it's windy and dry. There's not much pollen in the air when it's raining, but as soon as the ground dries up, the pollen count will rise again," Dr. Safadi explains.

When it's necessary to spend the day outdoors, fall allergy sufferers are encouraged to change their clothes and take a shower to prevent transferring pollen from their garments, hair, and skin onto their bedding. When at home, keep the windows closed and use air conditioning if cooling is necessary. When driving, it's also helpful to keep the windows rolled up. If you need to use the vehicle's air-conditioning system, set it on "recirculate."

To discourage the growth of mold inside your home, use a dehumidifier in the basement and in other damp, enclosed areas. Be sure to clean the dehumidifier regularly according to the manufacturer's instructions to prevent the unit itself from becoming a source of mold. The use of an exhaust fan will help prevent mold proliferation in the bathroom. It's also helpful to minimize the time you spend in mold-prone areas, such as the basement, garage, or crawlspace. Leaky water pipes and any sources of rain water infiltration should be repaired promptly.

Before treating fall allergies, it's important to make certain your symptoms are actually allergy-related. "As kids go back to school, we typically see an increase in the prevalence of upper respiratory infections, which are often confused with allergy symptoms. A hallmark of allergy is itching. Nasal and eye itchiness and sneezing are generally seen to a greater extent with allergies than with upper respiratory infections," says Dr. Safadi.

In many instances, fall allergies can be managed using over-the-counter antihistamines and decongestants. It's important, however, to be aware of potential side effects from these medications, such as sleepiness, increased blood pressure, headache, or insomnia.

Prescription nasal, oral, and injectable corticosteroids can also be effective, though Dr. Safadi points out that these drugs do have the potential for serious long-term side effects, such as osteoporosis, cataracts, or glaucoma, when used repeatedly.

Allergy immunotherapy, which involves the injection of purified extracts of allergens at increasing doses to help the individual develop a tolerance, is a highly effective treatment modality. "In fact, for allergic rhinitis secondary to pollen or animal dander, allergy immunotherapy has a success rate greater than 95 percent," states Dr. Safadi. The injections are administered once or twice per week initially and then once every two to four weeks for a period of four to five years.

More recently, studies have been done using a sublingual form of immunotherapy, in which the allergen is administered in the form of drops underneath the tongue rather than by injection. This method has been used in other countries for many years but is considered experimental inside the US and has not yet been approved by the FDA.

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