

Seasonal allergy sufferers: Get ready for ragweed!

A major trigger of seasonal allergy symptoms is just beginning to take flight. From around mid-August until the first killing frost, a particularly irritating pollen will be spreading far and wide through the air, making approximately 20 percent of Americans miserable with symptoms such as sneezing, runny nose, nasal congestion, eye irritation and puffiness, itchy nose and throat, headaches, and asthma flare-ups. The source of this airborne scourge? Ragweed.

According to allergist Dr. Ronald Negrich, ragweed is just one of many weeds that pollinate during this period, but it's the most common and causes the most problems for allergy sufferers. Those particularly sensitive to ragweed pollen may even begin to experience symptoms in early August. "Ragweed is a very prolific pollen producer," Dr. Negrich notes. "The plant lives for only one year, but in that time, it can produce up to one billion pollen particles. In fact, about 75 to 90 percent of the pollen floating in the air from August to October is from ragweed."

Not only is ragweed pollen exceptionally abundant, but it's also a world-class traveler. Though most of the pollen settles relatively close to the source plant, it can be borne upon the wind for a distance upwards of 400 miles and an altitude of up to two miles.

Ragweed (whose generic name is, ironically, *Ambrosia*) is found throughout the US but is most abundant in the Midwest and Eastern states. It tends to thrive best in areas where the soil has recently been disturbed or anywhere it has a chance to get a foothold ahead of other weeds and grasses, such as along roadsides and riverbanks, in abandoned fields, and in vacant lots. The seeds of the ragweed plant can lie dormant for decades until environmental conditions favor germination.

It's also worth noting that the proteins in ragweed pollen are known to cross-react with proteins found in certain forms of produce, particularly cantaloupe melons and bananas. This cross-reaction can cause an irritating tingling in the mouths of sensitive individuals.

The symptoms of ragweed allergy can often be managed effectively with antihistamines or, if they fail to provide adequate control, allergy immunotherapy (a.k.a. allergy shots), which helps significantly. But, avoidance should also be considered an essential element of the strategy to minimize the impact of ragweed pollen. Moving to an area where the pollen is less abundant—such as higher altitudes, out West, or, perhaps, Hawaii—is one avoidance alternative, but let's face it, for most people, that's just not a practical solution. Besides, given the extensive range of the ragweed plant and the distances its pollen can travel, it's not so easy to move beyond ragweed's reach.

"A good avoidance strategy includes trying to stay indoors with air conditioning and a high-efficiency particulate air—or HEPA—filter when the pollen count tends to be highest. Ragweed pollen is most profuse between the hours of 10:00 a.m. and 3:00 p.m., so allergy sufferers should try to stay indoors during that time frame," Dr. Negrich advises. "When you must spend time outdoors, it's a good idea to take your allergy medications prior to heading out and to wear a dust mask if you're able. Wearing glasses or sunglasses will reduce the amount of pollen that gets in your eyes, and saline spray can be used to flush the pollen out of your nose. When you come back indoors, be sure to change out of your clothes and wash your hair to avoid transferring pollen to your furnishings and bed. Also, avoid hanging clothes on a clothes line to dry because they'll function as a pollen trap."

Dr. Negrich also points out that proper management of year-round allergies—such as dust mite and pet dander allergies—can make a major difference in the severity of one's reaction to seasonal allergens, such as ragweed. If these day-to-day allergies aren't appropriately controlled, the immune system will already be primed to overreact once pollen production kicks into high gear. "On the other hand, if you take care of your regular allergies, your allergist can then treat you for ragweed pollen and very likely keep you feeling fine throughout the year," he says.

Because numerous weeds pollinate at the same time as ragweed, it's important for people who experience allergy symptoms during late summer and fall to have testing done to determine which, if any, other pollens they might be sensitive to. All those pollens will be floating around simultaneously, and there's no way to avoid one but not another. Also, if testing identifies more than one form of pollen as a trigger, it's necessary to treat for all of them. For example, if immunotherapy is the chosen method of allergy management, extracts from each identified pollen allergen would need to be included in the injections.

"Remember, if ragweed pollen is making you miserable, you have choices apart from moving to another part of the country or continuing to suffer with symptoms. If medications aren't doing the job, immunotherapy is a great alternative. Your allergist can help you develop an effective long-term management strategy so you're not afraid to go outside for three months of the year," Dr. Negrich says.

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