

See an allergist and put a stop to seasonal allergies

If you suffer with seasonal allergies, you don't need a calendar to tell you that spring has arrived in Northwest Ohio. No doubt, your persistent sneezing; runny, stuffy, itchy nose; itchy, watery eyes; and other unpleasant physical symptoms have already announced spring's arrival with resounding clarity.

What triggers this seasonal suffering? According to allergist/immunologist Dr. Lois Nelson, airborne pollen and mold spores are the biggest culprits—with pollen-producing trees and grasses currently leading the charge and various weeds poised to launch their assault later in summer. Molds tend to kick into high gear at change of season and whenever high humidity levels prevail—for example, during the recent periods of heavy rainfall.

Don't blame blooms

What about all those brightly colored flowers that come into bloom in spring? Aren't they part of the problem? "The plants with flowers that you can see don't contribute to seasonal allergies," Dr. Nelson comments. "They are typically insect-pollinated and produce a heavy, sticky pollen that doesn't get in the air. Weeds produce the smallest pollen and cause the highest sensitivity. The smaller the pollen, the lighter it is and the farther it can be inhaled into the respiratory tree. Grass pollen is the next largest in size, followed by tree pollen."

As far as the local timing of these seasonal allergy triggers is concerned, Dr. Nelson points out that five grasses are set to peak around Memorial Day, non-ragweed weeds make their presence felt around the third week of July, and ragweed kicks in like clockwork between the 15th and 18th of August.

Allergy or common cold?

Because seasonal allergies share many symptoms with the common cold, it's sometimes hard to determine which condition is causing your suffering. But there are some characteristics that set them apart. For example, frequent bouts of sneezing and nasal itchiness tend to be hallmarks of allergy. One giveaway that Dr. Nelson commonly observes in patients is the "seasonal allergy salute"—repeatedly rubbing the nose in an effort to relieve both stuffiness and that irritating itch at the same time.

Nothing to sneeze at

It's tempting to make the assumption that seasonal allergy symptoms, while annoying, are nothing to be overly concerned about. Indeed, many people simply resign themselves to periodic suffering or become so acclimated to their symptoms that they don't even realize the extent to which allergies impact their lives. But the potential complications associated with seasonal allergies can go way beyond bouts of sneezing and nasal stuffiness.

Asthma, "allergic eyes" (allergic conjunctivitis and shiners under the eyes due to swelling), headache over the sinuses, allergic sinusitis, inability to breathe through the nose, fluid in the ears, and recurrent croup (common in kids) are just some of the physical complications that can accompany seasonal allergies. "People with uncontrolled allergies also experience more infections in general. They get more colds and tend to keep them longer because they're stuffy all the time and they transfer germs from other surfaces to the nose when 'saluting.' Plus, the mucus that's plugging them up is a very nice culture medium for bacteria and the temperature inside the tip of the nose hovers right around 32 degrees Centigrade, which is the ideal temperature for growing respiratory viruses," Dr. Nelson states.

Quality-of-life concerns

Many of these physical complications translate into quality-of-life issues for the seasonal allergy sufferer, as well. The inability to breathe through the nose can cause sleep

deprivation, which leads to inattentiveness and difficulty concentrating at work or in school. Also, kids who are chronic mouth breathers are more likely to require braces and tend to develop an elongated face shape. Of course, fluid buildup in the ears can adversely affect hearing, and asthma symptoms can significantly interfere with sleep, athletics, and many activities of daily living. Seasonal allergies can even deny sufferers some of life's simple pleasures, such as taking an early evening stroll or doing a little work in the garden.

Diagnosis and treatment

Diagnosing seasonal allergies usually requires a multifaceted approach on the part of the allergist, including taking a complete history, doing a thorough physical exam, conducting a skin test to determine what the patient is allergic to, and performing a lung-function test to check for symptoms in the lower airways. Treatment options fit into one of three general categories: avoidance, medications, and allergy hyposensitization injections—better known as allergy shots.

Avoidance

Every seasonal allergy sufferer's first line of defense should be avoidance, and, as Dr. Nelson explains, any good, board-certified allergist can educate patients on how to avoid their particular allergy trigger. For example, pollen counts tend to be higher at dusk and in the early morning and lower at mid-day and after dark. Hence, people with pollen allergies can minimize their exposure by limiting outdoor activities to mid-day or nighttime hours. To limit mold exposure, it's important to control humidity. Running the air conditioning in your home not only lowers humidity, thereby reducing mold, but also has the added benefit of allowing you to keep the windows closed in the summer, thereby reducing the amount of pollen that finds its way in.

Medications

Seasonal allergy symptoms can often be effectively managed through the use of various medications. Over-the-counter antihistamines, such as loratadine, cetirizine (both non-sedating), and benadryl (sedating), can be helpful for many patients. Cromolyn sodium nasal sprays (e.g., NasalCrom®) and antihistamine eye drops containing ketotifen fumarate (e.g., Zaditor®) can also help ease symptoms. However, Dr. Nelson strongly advises against using either decongestant nasal sprays or decongestant eye drops. Other over-the-counter products that can help soothe seasonal allergy symptoms include natural tears or ophthalmologic saline as well as saline nose sprays and nasal washes.

When allergy symptoms prove to be too severe to manage with over-the-counter remedies, a variety of good prescription-strength medications can be utilized to help seasonal allergy sufferers achieve effective control.

Allergy shots

While medications treat the symptoms of allergy, allergy shots actually alter the underlying disease process. As Dr. Nelson explains, "The series of regular injections gradually decreases your sensitivity to the allergen. Essentially, the injections down-regulate the whole system so you don't make as much of the allergy antibody when you're exposed to the allergen. Shots have been proven effective for cat and dog dander, dust mites, pollen, and most common molds."

Those who experience some anxiety over the prospect of receiving a series of shots can rest assured that the needles used are very tiny and are injected just beneath the skin—not into the muscle—so they cause no pain.

Why see an allergist?

Seasonal allergy treatment often begins with over-the-counter remedies and visits to the family doctor, but if effective control is not achieved through these avenues, it's time to schedule an appointment with an allergist. Having completed four years of medical

school, a three-year residency in internal or pediatric medicine, and two years of fellowship training in allergy/asthma and immunology, allergists are uniquely poised to manage allergies and asthma. They're experts not only in the treatment of these conditions, but also in identifying allergy and asthma triggers and providing education on how patients can effectively avoid them.

So, if seasonal allergies are starting to affect your quality of life, stop suffering in silence. See an allergist and start feeling better.

Dr. Lois Nelson

Toledo Allergy Society

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