

Survival Strategies for Seasonal Allergies-Courtesy of Lopez Island Pharmacy

Experts are calling this one of the worst allergy seasons on record; even people who have not noticed problems before are reporting symptoms. Seasonal allergies affect more than 35 million people in the US. Many places are reporting pollen counts 20-25% higher than usual. If you are sneezing, coughing or itching your way through spring and into summer maybe we can help you cope armed with some facts and tips.

What is it? – Blame the “boys”. Seasonal allergies are caused by pollens, the tiny egg-shaped male cells of flowering plants. Large, waxy pollens from colorful flowers rarely are the culprits because those “bright” flowers attract bees and other insects to spread their pollen for them (clever aren’t they?). On the other hand the “dull” trees, grasses and low-growing weeds have small, light, dry pollens that are well-suited for spread by the wind. Trees pollinate earliest and cause many spring allergy symptoms. Grasses are next in the cycle and bring on later spring and summer allergies. Last in the cycle are the weeds which we’ll see causing late summer and fall allergy problems. Mold spores can be air-borne as well, and can vary by season or cause allergy symptoms any time of year. Of course, rain and damp conditions can worsen the presence of mold spores. (Animal dander, dust mites, dyes and a host of other offenders can cause allergies all year, but that’s another article!)

What does it do? – A “swell” idea. When you exceed your allergy threshold (your tolerance to a substance) symptoms will appear. Allergy symptoms basically are a combination of effects all based on edema or swelling. Simple swelling is the most common result of an allergic reaction and can occur in many locations. If the swelling occurs topically, the skin stretches causing intense itching. The resultant scratching leaves you with an “atopic dermatitis” or eczema. Other places where swelling produces symptoms are in the upper respiratory tract which may cause sinus obstruction and a “stuffy” nose or cut off the sense of smell. It can also close off the ear’s Eustachian tube (affecting hearing or resulting in ear infections). Additionally it can cause edema near the larynx causing “allergic hoarseness” or in the trachea leading to an irritating cough. A more serious form of allergic edema can be seen in asthma where swelling occurs in the airways, making breathing difficult. In the most serious allergic reaction, the offending allergen will set off a chain reaction in a person's immune

system that may lead to swelling of the airways, loss of blood pressure, and loss of consciousness, resulting in anaphylactic shock.

Put Pollen in its Place! If you find you are one of the millions pummeled by pollen here are some tips in a nutshell. Before choosing any medication, ask your pharmacist for more information, contra-indications, doses, side-effects, etc. Antihistamines can help lessen your body's reaction to that pesky pollen and help with sneezing, itching and runny nose. If your allergies keep you from sleeping, one of the more drowsy-inducing antihistamines (diphenhydramine) may be the ticket. For those that want relief without drowsiness, there are non-sedating antihistamines (like loratadine). Itchy eyes may be helped by antihistamine eye drops and cool compresses sometimes offer relief. For that stuffy nose (or congested ears), pseudoephedrine might help unplug you and guaiafenesin and water can help keep the mucous moving out of your head. Decongestant nasal sprays are OK for quick relief but do not use them for more than three days. It's best NOT to suppress a cough that is helping you "move the mucous". If you suffer from more problematic allergies prescription medications or allergy desensitizing shots may help.

Timeless Tips! Most pollen is released in the morning hours so save your outdoor trips, gardening or lawn mowing for the afternoon. Mowing damp grass stirs up less pollen than mowing dry grass. If you know weeding your garden gives your nose fits, try wearing a filter mask to keep pollen from polluting your proboscis. Take a shower and change your clothes after working outside to get the offending pollen off your duds, hair, etc. Dogs and cats can bring in a load of pollen after dashing through the grass, so clean them off as well. Open windows (at home or in the car) are another "no-no" as the pollen floods in with the breeze. Air-conditioning helps filter out pollen. Steer manure, a common garden fertilizer, is loaded with cattle dander, a potent allergen. So that's some of the "poop" on pollen. I am out of space once again.

For more info:

- 1) Consult your local pharmacist or physician
- 2) www.aaaai.org/patients/publicedmat/tips/outdoorallergens.stm
- 3) www.meredy.com/nursetips/allergytips.html
- 4) http://healthandenergy.com/101_allergy_tips.htm (note: underscore between 101 and allergy, and between allergy and tips)

