

Wellness EMPLOYEE report



Springtime allergies...nothing to sneeze at

Open windows, longer days and blossoming flowers and trees are all welcoming first signs of spring. For many people, however, springtime marks the beginning of dreaded spring allergies and stocking up on antihistamines, scheduling allergy shots or consulting with an allergy specialist.

What's in an allergy?

While there's a tendency to think of allergy symptoms as just sneezing and itchy eyes, seasonal allergic rhinitis – more commonly referred to as “hay fever” or just simply “allergies” – can be much more when a person's immune system reacts to allergens such as pollens, grass and airborne fungi. Approximately 20 percent of Canadians have immune systems that react against these substances. The body fights back by releasing a chemical called histamine into

the bloodstream, producing a collection of symptoms such as a runny nose, itchy and watery eyes, sneezing and coughing.

When pollen grains get into the nose of someone who has an allergy, their immune system can go into overdrive. Trees and ragweed are the main triggers for hay fever and over the summer months grasses and weeds typically produce pollen. The amount of pollen in the air can play a role in whether hay fever symptoms develop – that is, hot, dry, windy days are more likely to increase the amount of pollen being carried in the air than cool, damp, rainy days when most pollen counts drop as the pollen is washed to the ground.

Treatment for spring allergies

Spring allergies can often be confused with the common cold or an ear or sinus infection and that confusion can keep

people from seeking treatment. While allergies can be treated successfully with a number of over-the-counter options, if your body doesn't respond then it's a good idea to talk to your family physician to determine the best therapeutic option.

Allergy testing can reveal the specific allergens to which a person is reacting. Skin testing is the most common method of allergy testing, or alternatively your doctor may conduct a RAST blood test, which detects antibody levels to a particular allergen and can help determine to which allergens you react to. There are new non-sedating drugs that can help alleviate hay fever symptoms and there are nature-based therapies to alleviate symptoms that may include a change in diet or nasal flushing.

The path you decide on should be pursued in consultation with your physician.

Allergy treatments

- Eye drops relieve itchy, watery eyes;
- Antihistamines reduce sneezing, sniffing and itching by lowering the amount of histamine (the substance produced during an allergic reaction) in the body;
- Decongestants clear mucus out of the nasal passageways to relieve congestion and swelling;
- Antihistamine/decongestants combine the effects of both drugs;
- Nasal spray decongestants relieve congestion and may clear clogged nasal passages faster than oral decongestants. Long-term usage may cause problems;
- Cromolyn sodium nasal spray can help prevent hay fever by stopping the release of histamine before it can trigger allergy symptoms; and
- Prescription nasal sprays with corticosteroids reduce inflammation in the nose, and allergy shots expose your body to gradually increasing doses of the allergen until you become tolerant of it.

Source: HealthProfessor.com

Pollen patrol

It's nearly impossible to completely avoid spring allergies if you live in an area where plants grow. However, you can ease sniffing, sneezing and watery eyes by avoiding your main allergy triggers.

- Try to stay indoors whenever the pollen count is very high (pollen counts usually peak in the mornings).
- Cover air-conditioning vents with cheesecloth to filter pollen.
- Keep your doors and windows closed whenever possible during the spring months to keep allergens out. An air purifier may also help.
- Clean the air filters in your home regularly. Also, clean air ducts, bookshelves, vents and other places where pollen can collect.
- Wash your hair after going outside, because pollen can collect there.
- Wear a mask when mowing grass.
- Vacuum regularly. Wear a mask because vacuuming can kick up pollen, mold and dust that might be trapped in your carpet.

Source: WebMD

According to webmd.com, global warming is causing allergens to peak, so the pollen counts have become noticeably higher in recent years. People who have spring allergies will inevitably experience a steady stream of unpleasant symptoms when the

pollen count is at its highest. People may outgrow an allergy as their immune system becomes less sensitive to the allergen; however as a general rule, once a substance causes allergies for an individual, it can continue over the long term.

The air you breathe, whatever touches your skin, anything you put in your mouth – all have the potential for causing an allergy. And although there is no magical cure for spring allergies, it's important to avoid allergy triggers. As a precaution consult your family physician to determine the severity of symptoms and an appropriate treatment.

Sources: CBC Radio 1 in Nova Scotia (May 28, 2009); Allergy Canada @ www.allergycanada.com/; www.webmd.com/; Allergy.HealthProfessor.com/; AllergyRelief101.com.



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