



PRO-SPEAK

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Preventative measures key to avoiding allergies

As people settle into the warmer temperatures and sunny days associated with the onset of summer and early fall, some 40 million Americans also experience the misery of seasonal allergies caused by pollen and mold exposure during these seasons.

Seasonal allergic rhinitis (more commonly known as hay fever) occurs as a result of pollen exposure to wind-pollinated plants such as trees, grasses and weeds like ragweed. Since pollen from these three groups of plants is produced and released in predictable, yearly time intervals, pollen-sensitive individuals typically experience symptoms accordingly, from one season to the next. In our region, trees pollinate from early March through May; grasses, from mid-May through mid-July; and weeds, mainly in August and September. Among these three, weeds (ragweed especially) are the most prolific producers of allergenic pollen, and often cause significant symptoms in affected individuals. Although molds are more ubiquitous in nature and may potentially cause perennial symptoms, outdoor molds are mainly problematic from spring through late fall, when the appropriate weather conditions for spore production exist.

In order for the pollen from wind-pollinated plants to become airborne and cause symptoms, wind is necessary. In general, warm, windy and dry conditions create the best environment for pollen distribution. Conversely, rainy and damp weather will often bring relief to pollen sufferers. However, such conditions will promote spore production, and those allergic to molds will notice increased symptoms. Unlike wind-pollinated plants, which use wind as a vector in transferring pollen from one plant to the next, flowering plants such as roses and daisies usually do not cause symptoms in most people, since the pollen from these plants is carried by insects like butterflies and bees.

Common symptoms of hay fever include sneezing, runny nose, itchy and watery eyes, nasal congestion, cough and sinus headache. Although these symptoms may only be a nuisance to some, in many it can cause significant misery and drastically impact quality of life. Numerous studies have shown that allergies can affect mood, behavior, cognition, sleep and general productivity. It is estimated that in the United

States allergies annually account for 2 million missed school days and 3.5 million lost work days. Allergic rhinitis has also been linked to the development of asthma, sinusitis and recurrent ear infections.

Though it is often difficult to avoid outdoor pollens and molds, the following tips can help significantly:

- Keep windows closed and use an air conditioner in both your home and your car.
- Avoid being outdoors when pollen counts are the highest of the day, between 5 a.m. and 10 a.m., and on windy days.
- Do not hang clothing or sheets outside to dry, as they can collect pollen and mold.
- Avoid mowing and raking, or wear a mask when performing these tasks.
- After spending time outdoors, change clothing as soon as possible to avoid continued contact with accumulated pollen. Additionally, if significant time was spent outdoors, take a shower to remove pollen from the body and hair.
- Observe daily pollen and mold counts, and avoid being outdoors on high-count days. There are numerous weather-related sites on the Internet that maintain up-to-date pollen count figures.

Although avoidance measures are helpful, medical treatment is often necessary to control allergy symptoms. Safe and effective prescription medications, such as steroid nasal sprays and non-sedating antihistamines, are available. Over-the-counter medications are also available; however, they generally are not as effective, need to be taken more frequently, and may cause unwanted side effects.

An affected individual may also be a candidate for immunotherapy (allergy shots), which is a form of desensitization that allows the body to build up immunity to the allergenic substances. Over a period of time, immunotherapy may cause significant reduction in symptoms and lessen the need for medications. It is the only disease-modifying treatment available at this time.

With proper identification and treatment, seasonal allergy sufferers can experience significant improvement in their symptoms and quality of life, ultimately leading to happier, healthier and comfortable summer and fall seasons. BP