Effective Ways to Handle Allergy Season's Arrival

By ACSH Staff — March 23, 2016

Spring is in the air -- and as of last Sunday, also on your calendar. With it comes allergy season as pollen counts rapidly rise. And if you are one of the nearly 60 million Americans who will begin the annual battle with hay fever and similar annoyances, a few guidelines, according to the American College of Allergy, Asthma & Immunology, can help you and other red-nosed folks get through the suffering.

Hay fever, otherwise known as allergic rhinitis, affects people whose immune systems react adversely to certain environmental elements. During the spring, summer or early fall, the most common culprits are airborne spores and pollens from grasses and trees.

Pollen makes its most disturbing mark in dry and windy weather. Because its airborne, pollen rides the wind to travel wider and farther distances. For this reason some areas of the South actually see their pollen seasons start in January and last almost year-round, through October. As of March 20, the website Pollen.com reports some of the worst pollen damage in the South, with areas such as Amarillo, TX and Alamosa, CO, getting the brunt of it.

So, says the Centers for Disease Control, while most people living in these and other areas of the country can't prevent their allergies, they can limit their reactions to them. Those with allergies would do best to stay indoors during peak pollen periods such as windy spells and midmorning. Keep windows closed and use well-cleaned air-conditioning units in cars and homes.

When outdoor living is a must, however, one would do best to wear glasses or sunglasses to minimize pollen’s contact with the eyes, according to the ACAAI. Keep eye-rubbing to a minimum, and wash hands and clothes as soon after contact with pets as possible. For kind pet-owners who won't put their dogs or cats outside, make sure to at least keep them out of the bedroom. One oft over-looked hay fever symptom is fatigue, due to poor sleep quality caused by allergies.

But because allergens are airborne (and people need air, no matter how bad their allergies are), allergic reactions are often unavoidable. For this reason, the ACAAI recommends a number of
allergy medications to reduce symptoms. They find that intranasal corticosteroids -- such as nasal sprays -- are most effective in treating hay fever symptoms like sneezing, itching and runny noses. At the same time, antihistamines such as Benadryl work to fight the body's histamines -- the main chemicals responsible for allergic reactions.

Many people aren't satisfied with medications, however, and some with severe symptoms may want a more permanent "cure." The National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases recommends allergen immunotherapy. For over 100 years, doctors have used allergy shots, otherwise known as subcutaneous immunotherapy, to bring about long-term symptom relief.

The doctor gives patients injections (1-2 times a week) for 3-to-6 months, containing gradually more and more of the target allergen. They then give the shots less and less over a few years, until patients are symptom-free. Due to immunotherapy's time and cost needs, however, only about 5 percent of people with allergies go this route to treat hay fever.

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