How Do We Count Pollen, Anyway?

By Ana-Marija Dolaskie — April 1, 2016

Happy Spring! Cue the sniffles, scratchy throats, and sinus headaches. Experts warn that this year's pollen count is high, but how do they actually measure it?

It's actually pretty simple: pollen counts are generally taken with a system called a "rotorod." The sampling device uses silicone grease-coated clear rods that test the air on a schedule, usually over the course of 24 hours. The rods are then examined for the number of pollen grains covering the rod or portions of it. This count can then be converted into units of grains per cubic meter of air, and eventually into a calculated amount that makes sense to the general public: low, moderate, or high.

Because really, that's all we allergy-riddled folk need to know to decide whether to hide indoors or step outside. To make our lives easier, Pollen.com has a pollen forecaster for specific areas, check it out here!

You may be surprised to know that there are no government pollen trackers, only private companies handle pollen counts and provide the data to consumers. And, according to the American Academy of Allergy, Asthma & Immunology (AAAAI) anyone can become a pollen tracker. A certification is required, and individuals must pass an exam.

OK, if you won't take up pollen tracking as a second job, how can you stay ahead of it?

If you are prone to allergies and you can't lock yourself indoors between 10 a.m. and 4 p.m. (when pollen counts are highest), experts say consider tackling your symptoms early.

"If you have allergies, one of the best things you can do is start medications early, even before your symptoms kick in," Dr. Neeta Ogden, a New York allergist, tells CNN.

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Newer generation antihistamines like Zyrtec, Claritin and Allegra offer non-drowsy relief and should be taken at the very first sign of symptoms. For nighttime relief opt for Benadryl or Chlor-Trimeton; both offer some drowsiness and drainage control to help you snooze. Over-the-counter nasal sprays are also available that aid in allergic rhinitis by calming inflamed nasal passages caused by seasonal allergies.

Though avoiding outdoor activity when pollen counts are highest can help, it's important to note that many places in your home can be the perfect breeding ground for bacteria, which is why you shouldn't overlook the power of spring cleaning. Here are some tips to help tackle allergies in your home:

**Dust Often**— Believe it or not, there is a right way and a wrong way to dust your home. The wrong way is using a dry rag or a duster; both will only stir more dust in the air, rather than trap it. The right way is to use a wet towel or cloth, which does a better job at picking up dust and dirt. If you're super sensitive to the dust in your home, use a mask and gloves while cleaning.

**Wash Everything**— Including your washing machine. You may think washing your clothes takes care of the machine as well, but it's not true. The inside of a washing machine can hold a goodly amount of allergens, so be sure to wipe it down with bleach at least once a month to prevent mold and bacteria growth. Washing rugs, curtains, and towels in hot water helps, too.

**Crank the AC**— If you have air conditioning, use it. It helps dry the air and clear it of dust and allergens that irritate your nasal passage.

**Get a Hibiscus Plant**— Most allergy sufferers have sensitivity to flowery plants, so picking any plant that doesn't make your face swell up like a balloon is a good choice: the hibiscus, for one, produces very little (if any) pollen, so it's a good option as an indoor plant.

**Shower at Night**— Seems a bit counterintuitive, but washing off any pollen that may be trapped on your skin and hair will significantly reduce discomfort at night, and keep allergens off your bed.

And speaking of keeping things off your bed, let's not cuddle up with Fido or the kitty if sneezing uncontrollably isn't your thing — anyone who struggles with dander will have trouble sharing a bed with a pet.
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