

House Calls

By Rikki Schuster, PA-C

Itchy, watery eyes, runny nose, dry cough, sneezing...no, this isn't a cold medicine advertisement. It's the tell tale signs for some that spring is in the air. Of course we are all ready for the cold weather to pass, however, some people dread the thought of warm breezes, flower blossoms, and growing grass. These are the people that suffer from seasonal allergies.

The most common signs of allergies are an itchy or runny nose, congestion, sneezing fits, wheezing, eye irritation or itching, dry, itchy skin, and possibly a chronic dry cough. Typically, the allergy sufferer will have several of the above symptoms, but to get a definite diagnosis, skin testing may be performed by an allergist for confirmation.

There are three basic principles of allergy management: 1) avoidance of the allergen (what you are allergic to), 2) treatment of the symptoms, 3) immunotherapy (allergy shots). Avoidance is the most effective, and should always be considered. Success requires accurate diagnosis of the allergens (generally through skin testing), and failure is due to inadequate environmental control.

Springtime brings with it high pollen counts, which is one of the main culprits of allergies. Airborne allergens can travel significant distances, yet concentrations are highest near the source. Pollen release occurs early in the morning, but is also dependent on temperature and wind velocity. Close windows and stay in air-conditioned places when pollen counts are high.

Many people are allergic to animal dander. If the allergy is slight, they may be able to just keep

the pet out of their bedroom, however usually the pet needs to be removed from the home altogether. Washing or 'treating' the fur of an animal has not proved to reduce the incidence of allergy occurrence.

House dust and dust mites are another problem source for many people, as well as mold spores. Mattresses and pillows should be encased in dust proof material, the bedroom floor should be uncarpeted, and the room should be dusted frequently. Electronic air purifiers may help for some people, but are of unproved effectiveness. Mold spores outside are unavoidable during certain seasons.

Gardening and farming can be associated with high levels and should be avoided if you suffer from allergies due to mold spores. Inside, mold can be controlled by repairing leaks and cleaning mold build-up in sinks, shower curtains and pipes.

Treatment of symptoms is best achieved through drug therapy. Antihistamines, decongestants, and steroids are the three classes of drugs prescribed by most medical providers. Antihistamines such as diphenhydramine (Benadryl) can be purchased over the counter and is typically the antihistamine attached to most sinus combination medications available without a prescription. One drawback to this medication is the drowsiness side effect experienced by most people. A newer class of antihistamine is available by prescription through your health care provider that may be more effective than over the counter preparations without the side effects.

There are also topical antihistamines such as eye drops and nasal sprays that can be prescribed if indicated. The antihistamine acts by 'drying up' the watery eyes, and nose, and helps with most of the

itching components that are experienced by the majority of allergy sufferers.

Some people experience opposite symptoms and become 'stuffy' or 'blocked' in their nose and ears. For those, decongestants such as pseudoephedrine can be obtained either over the counter or by prescription. For those people who have both symptoms, there are several combination medications available, and a consultation with your health care provider may be indicated to guide you in the right direction. Steroids are used sparingly in more severe cases at the discretion of the medical provider, and should not be over-used.

Finally, for those people that suffer year round allergies, or those whose normal daily activities are interrupted due to their allergy sensitivities, a consultation with an allergy specialist is in your best interest. The allergist may perform specialized testing on you and may even suggest allergy shots to make your body more immune to the allergens that give you grief.

With the right therapy, even those of you who typically sneeze, wheeze and cough during this time of year can still enjoy the beauty of the Outer Banks in springtime.

Rikki Schuster is a certified Physician Assistant with over seven years of Emergency Medicine and Urgent Care experience; including two and a half years on the Outer Banks. She is currently providing Medical House Calls for acute, non-life threatening illnesses in your home, school, or workplace. She may be contacted by calling 252-475-2007 seven days a week.