

House Calls

Allergies...Nothing to Sneeze At

By Rikki Schuster, PA-C

Spring is finally in the air! Unfortunately, so are the grass, tree, and weed pollens. While many of us welcome the warm sunshine of spring, with the green grass, fragrant flowers, and budding trees, there are millions of Americans that dread the other signs of spring: runny noses, itchy eyes, and sneezing. Spring is traditionally the main season when allergy symptoms 'blossom' due to new growth on trees and weeds, however fall is a close second with a whole different set of blooming plants, as well as leaf molds. According to the National Center on Health Statistics, about 26 million Americans endure chronic seasonal allergies, while the number of people with milder symptoms may be as high as 40 million. One study puts the annual cost of 'hay fever', which seasonal allergies are commonly called, at \$2.4 billion in medications, and \$1.1 billion in doctor's bills.

What exactly is an allergy? It is when your body is overly sensitive to certain substances in the environment. This sensitivity produces allergic reactions that range from mild itching, sneezing, and eczema (inflamed, itchy skin) to severe hives, wheezing, and shortness of breath. The most common symptom of seasonal allergies is allergic rhinitis, more commonly called hay fever, which is very similar to the common cold. The main differences are a cold typically runs its course in 7-10 days, where allergic rhinitis tends to linger for weeks or even months as long as the person is exposed to the substance they are allergic to. Despite its name 'hay fever' allergies do not cause fever, however you may run a low grade fever with a cold. The common cold tends to produce thick, yellow nasal drainage, whereas allergic rhinitis causes thin, watery nasal drainage. An allergy is often associated with skin, eye, and mouth itchiness, and can often be traced to a specific allergic trigger.

If you think you may have allergies, it is recommended that you visit a medical provider to review your medical history and symptoms. Depending on the severity of your symptoms, your provider may advise you to visit an allergy specialist for further testing to determine the

specific substances you are reacting to. This testing is called 'skin testing' in which the allergist applies a small amount of common allergic substances to the top layer of your skin and records your reaction to each of these substances. Once the cause and severity of your allergic symptoms are determined, your provider will develop a treatment plan. The first, most obvious step of this plan is typically avoidance of the allergic substance (allergen). If your allergic symptoms are caused by plants and trees, you should try to keep your windows closed and your air conditioner on. After you have been outside on a nice spring day, you may not realize it, but you are tracking those pollens into your home on your shoes, clothes, and even your hair. Leaving your shoes outside the door, changing your clothes when you come inside, and washing your hair every day during the allergy season is a good way to avoid lengthy exposure to the pollens you may track indoors. You may want to purchase an air filter that cleans out pollens, molds, and dust. Consider installing wood, tile, or vinyl flooring instead of carpet, since they can be mopped regularly. If you decide to keep the carpet, have someone else do the vacuuming (which should be done often) since the vacuuming process kicks up dust emissions. You should try to minimize clutter since it tends to collect dust and pollens. Those that suffer from seasonal allergies are often more likely to be sensitive to dust mites as well. It is a good idea to purchase a mattress and pillow cover to provide a barrier between you and dust mites in your bed where they tend to live and breed.

In addition to avoidance of the allergens that cause symptoms, many people opt to use medication for symptom relief. Today, there are a vast number of over the counter medications for the allergy sufferer to purchase and self medicate. Simple non drowsy anti-histamines like loratadine (Claritin) and cetirizine (Zyrtec) which were once available by prescription only are now available over the counter. These medications are indicated for the patient with basic allergy symptoms and are meant to be taken on a daily basis. Non medicated saline nasal spray is a good way to keep the nasal passages cleaned and moisturized during the allergy season. Many people have begun using various nasal washing systems available commercially; however it is best to consult your medical provider prior to utilizing these systems to verify they are right for your condition. There are numerous nasal decongestant sprays available that people tend to over use and then become 'addicted'. What actually

happens is the nose becomes dependant on the nasal decongestant spray, and stops working the way it should when the spray is overused, causing the nasal congestion to come back with a vengeance. If you are a patient who is 'hooked' on one of these nasal sprays, consult your medical provider for assistance on weaning off of the medication. The nasal decongestant sprays are extremely effective for short term relief, but should not be used for more than a few days. If you have tried self medicating with antihistamines or other over the counter allergy medications, have tried avoidance of the substances that cause your symptoms, and are still experiencing symptoms that are interfering with your day to day activities, you may want to consider seeking medical treatment from your primary care provider for other treatment options such as prescription allergy medication. If your symptoms are significant, and not controlled by medications, it may be recommended that you receive allergy shots, prescribed by your allergist. With a little allergen avoidance and a little modern day medication therapy, even those that suffer seasonal hay fever can enjoy the warmth of the spring sunshine.

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