

ALL
ABOUT

Allergies

BY JENNIFER SCHAEFER

If you're one of the estimated 10 percent of Americans with seasonal allergies, you've probably learned the hard way that your body can tell you as accurately as the calendar when the season turns from winter to spring. Whether your symptoms begin with watery eyes, an itchy nose or a scratchy throat, within a matter of days (or even hours), the ensuing rubbing, sneezing or throat-clearing leaves no doubt that allergy season is upon us. Luckily, with the latest advances in treatment and prevention, it isn't necessary for those with seasonal allergies to suffer through the Northwest's golden spring and summer months. Following is all the information you need to prepare for—and ultimately conquer—the upcoming allergy season.

WHAT ARE SEASONAL ALLERGIES?

Allergies of all types appear when the body's immune system responds to a substance, known as an allergen, as though it were a dangerous invader—a defense mechanism developed by humans millions of years ago. It does this by sending antibodies, the body's defenders, to the entry site, typically the nose, eyes or skin. The battle between allergen and antibody results in the release of chemical mediators into the bloodstream. These mediators cause changes in the body that produce the allergic symptoms.

For most seasonal allergy sufferers, the allergens that make it tempting to buy stock in Kleenex and Visine are caused by airborne pollen from trees, grasses and weeds. Spring is the season when seasonal allergies generally emerge because of new tree and plant growth, although some don't kick in until later in the year. According to the American Academy of Otolaryngology, allergies in the early spring are usually caused by the pollens of trees, such as elm, maple, birch, poplar, beech, ash, oak, walnut, sycamore, cypress, hickory, cottonwood and alder. Late springtime pollens come from grasses, including timothy, orchard, red top, sweet vernal, Bermuda, Johnson and some bluegrass. Late August brings ragweed, one of the most common causes of seasonal allergies in the United States.

Researchers at Merck & Co., a global pharmaceutical firm, have found that those with seasonal allergies generally are affected by one or both of the following categories of symptoms: allergic rhinitis, or symptoms involving the membrane lining the nose (which became known as "hay fever" long ago because some workers would sneeze when they worked around hay in the fields); and allergic conjunctivitis, or symptoms involving the membrane lining the eyelids and covering the whites of the eyes. Symptoms can range from being merely bothersome to being severe enough to cause one to miss days at school or work.

How can you be sure your runny nose is the result of an allergy instead of a common cold? The two ailments have differing symptoms, says Badrul Chowdhury, M.D., Ph.D., an allergist and immunologist in the Food and Drug Administration's Division of Pulmonary and Allergy Drug Products. "A cold tends to be short-lived, results in thicker nasal secretions and is usually associated with malaise and fever."

DISCOVERING WHAT YOU'RE ALLERGIC TO

If seasonal allergies are making you miserable, the best way to nip them in the bud is to consult an allergist. "It is better to get good treatment than to let it go," says William Storms, M.D., an allergist and professor of medicine at the University of Colorado Health Sciences Center in Denver. "First, it does affect a patient's quality of life. Second, it may lead to secondary diseases, such as ear infections, sinus infections and asthma."

To find an allergist in the Bellevue area, visit the American Academy of Allergy, Asthma and Immunology's Web site at www.aaaai.org.

An allergist will begin by asking you about your medical history and any allergic reactions you have experienced. Next, the allergist will probably order an allergy test to determine or confirm what you are allergic to. Following are a few different tests your doctor might administer (the first is the most common).

The prick test. This technique involves "pricking" a tiny amount of allergen into the skin. If you have an allergy, the specific allergens that you are allergic to will cause swelling and/or itching of the pricked site.

Intradermal test. This technique involves injecting a small amount of allergen under the skin with a syringe. It is often used if the prick test is ineffective.

Blood test. Bloods tests are more expensive than the first two tests, and the results are not available as rapidly. They are generally used only in cases when skin tests can't be performed, such as on patients taking certain medications (for example, antihistamines).

Depending on your history, you may be tested for as few as six allergens or as many as 80. Beware of doctors who suggest testing you for 200 or 300 allergens, says Berrilyn Ferguson, M.D., an associate professor and otolaryngologist at the University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine. With such a high number of allergens, the skin may react to everything, making the test useless.

Once the allergist has determined what you are allergic to, he or she will prescribe a treatment plan. Most treatment plans incorporate one or more of the following: environmental controls, allergy medication and/or allergy shots.





ENVIRONMENTAL CONTROLS

Environmental controls are measures that minimize a person's contact with the substance he or she is allergic to. The American Academy of Allergy, Asthma and Immunology gives the following tips to help you lessen your exposure to seasonal allergens.

- 🌿 Keep windows closed at night to prevent pollens or molds from drifting into the home.
- 🌿 Use an air conditioner and dehumidifier to keep air clean, cool and dry.
- 🌿 Keep car windows closed when traveling.
- 🌿 Minimize outdoor activity on days when the pollen count or humidity is reported to be high or on windy days when mold and pollen are blown about. To find out the pollen count in the Bellevue area, call 1-800-9-POLLEN or visit www.aaaai.org/nab.
- 🌿 Plan vacations to low-pollen areas such as the beach.
- 🌿 Use a paper mask when mowing or raking, which stirs up pollens and molds.
- 🌿 Avoid hanging sheets or clothing out to dry as pollen and molds might collect on them.
- 🌿 Take a shower after spending time outdoors to remove pollen and mold that may be on your skin and hair.
- 🌿 Pollen is often worse in the early morning hours, so try to limit outdoor activities during the hours of approximately 5 a.m. and 10 a.m.

SPRING is the season when seasonal allergies generally emerge because of new tree and plant growth.

ALLERGY MEDICATION

There is a wide variety of allergy medications available, both over-the-counter and by prescription. Following are the most common.

Nasal corticosteroids. Nasal corticosteroids have been shown to improve symptoms of sneezing, itching of the nose, runny nose and congestion. They are typically sprayed or inhaled into the nose once or twice daily. The newer drugs in this category are Nasonex and Flonase, both available by prescription. One drawback to these medications is that they may take a week or so to be maximally effective.

Oral antihistamines. These drugs, which are available in both over-the-counter and prescription forms, counteract the action of histamine, a substance released in the body during an allergic reaction. Benadryl, Chlor-Trimeton and Claritin are popular over-the-counter drugs. Drowsiness is a major side effect; non-drowsy antihistamines available by prescription include Clarinex, Allegra and Zyrtec.

Decongestants. These are available both by prescription and over-the-counter, and come in both oral and nasal spray forms. They are sometimes recommended in combination with antihistamines, as antihistamines alone do not have an effect on nasal congestion. Allegra D is an example of a prescription drug that contains both an antihistamine and a decongestant.

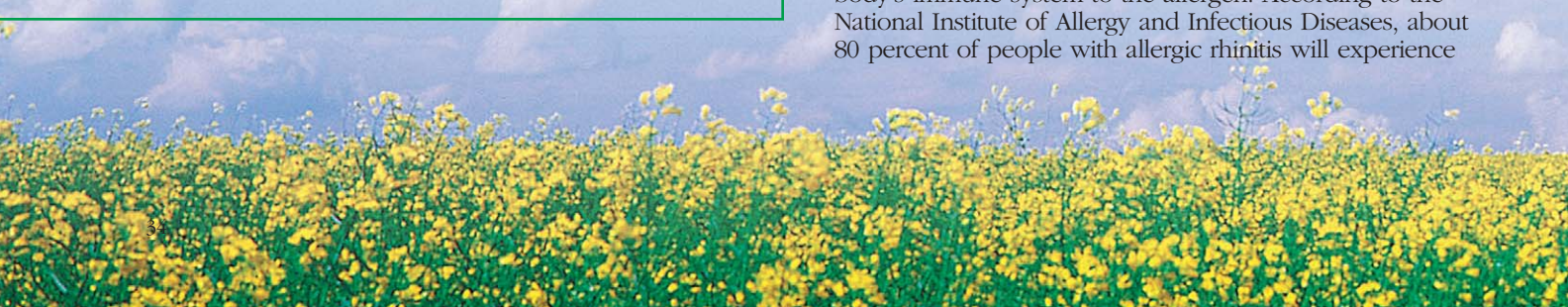
Non-steroidal nasal sprays. Nasalcrom nasal spray can help prevent symptoms of allergic rhinitis if used before symptoms start. It is a non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drug and needs to be used more often than the nasal corticosteroids, three to four times a day. Doctors often recommend Nasalcrom for children because it is extremely safe and available without a prescription.

Eye drops. For those with allergic conjunctivitis, bathing the eyes with over-the-counter eye drops (especially those containing antihistamines) can help irritation. Eye drops containing cromolyn, available by prescription, are used to prevent, rather than relieve, allergic conjunctivitis.

ALLERGY SHOTS

If allergy medication doesn't do the trick, your doctor might try allergy shots. Also known as immunotherapy, allergy shots offer many people long-lasting relief when medication has failed.

Getting allergy shots is a lengthy process that can take three to five years or longer. A small injection of the offending allergen is injected into the body—usually twice a week at first, then less often with larger doses as time goes on. The process is designed to desensitize the body's immune system to the allergen. According to the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, about 80 percent of people with allergic rhinitis will experience



a significant reduction in their symptoms and need for medication within a year of shots, and after about five years, it is possible for some patients to stop the shots completely.

In case of a bad reaction, your doctor will probably request that you stay at the office for about 20 minutes after the shot is given. That way, if you have a bad reaction, the doctor can give you something right away to stop it.

NATURAL ALLERGY RELIEF

Looking for a natural way to keep allergies at bay? Here are 13 suggestions for alleviating allergy-related sniffing, sneezing and headaches from the experts at Fitness magazine.

Pick up some produce. Fruits and vegetables with the deepest hues are highest in antioxidants and may have anti-inflammatory properties that help decrease congestion.

Avoid dairy, sugar, wheat and food additives. These are known to produce excess mucus, which causes congestion and nasal irritation.

Eat spicy foods. They can increase blood flow, which brings oxygen to the nasal passages and helps thin and eliminate mucus.

Drink water. Fluids help clear airways by hydrating mucous membranes. The wetter the membrane, the thinner the mucus and the more easily it can drain.

Choose foods that contain omega-3 fatty acids. Found in fish, almonds and flax seeds, omega-3's may help lessen respiratory symptoms by reducing inflammation.

Try herbs, such as stinging nettle, sodium selenite, aloe and fenugreek. Be sure to check product labels for dosages and talk to your doctor about possible side effects first.

Work out for 30 minutes daily. Moderate aerobic exercise strengthens your immune system, making it less sensitive to allergens.

Take yoga. Breathing exercises and simple yoga postures can relax the chest muscles and open airways.

Get a massage. Cranial massage can help open up nasal passages by promoting drainage. Massage has also been shown to decrease physical and mental stress, which enables your immune system to function better.

Steam your face. Hold your head over a bowl of steaming water for 15 minutes to relieve sinus pressure.

Drain your sinuses. After steaming, sit upright for several minutes to clear the frontal (above the eye) sinuses. Lie

down for several minutes to clear the ethmoid (between the eyes and nose) sinuses. To clear the maxillary sinuses (below the eyes), lie on the side opposite the sinus you want to drain for several minutes.

Try acupressure. Press the following points with your forefinger and thumb several times a day for 10 seconds each: the bridge of your nose, the spots where your eyebrows start and the points on your face next to where your nostrils flair out.

Practice visualization. Imagining that your nasal passages are clear can trick the body into acting that way because your nervous system responds equally to imagined and real perceptions.

For more information about how to leave seasonal and other types of allergies in the dust, visit the American Academy of Allergy, Asthma and Immunology's Web site at www.aaaai.org, or the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases' Web site at www3.niaid.nih.gov.

OTHER COMMON ALLERGIES

Not all allergies are seasonal. Following is a list of the most common nonseasonal allergens from the American Academy of Otolaryngology, all of which can be detected with an allergy test.



- 🌿 Products from dust mites (tiny bugs you can't see) that live in your home.
- 🌿 Proteins from furry pets, which are found in their skin secretions (dander), saliva and urine (it is actually not their hair).
- 🌿 Molds in your home or in the air outside.
- 🌿 Cockroach droppings.

More serious allergic reactions can be caused by:

- 🌿 Venoms from the stings of bees, wasps, yellow jackets, fire ants and other stinging insects.
- 🌿 Foods, such as peanuts or soy.
- 🌿 Natural rubber latex, such as gloves or balloons.
- 🌿 Drugs such as penicillin.

