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April 2, 2012

WELLNESS WEEKLY

ALLERGIES

This time of year is what we normally think of when it comes to seasonal allergies. As the trees bloom and the pollen gets airborne, allergy sufferers begin their annual ritual of sniffing and sneezing. Although there is no magical cure for spring allergies, there are a number of ways to combat them, from medication to household habits.

The biggest spring allergy trigger is pollen -- tiny grains released into the air by trees, grasses, and weeds for the purpose of fertilizing other plants. When pollen grains get into the nose of someone who's allergic, they send the immune system into overdrive.

The immune system, mistakenly seeing the pollen as foreign invaders, releases antibodies -- substances that normally identify and attack bacteria, viruses, and other illness-causing organisms. The antibodies attack the allergens, which leads to the release of chemicals called histamines into the blood. Histamines trigger the runny nose, itchy eyes, and other symptoms of allergies.

Allergy symptoms tend to be particularly high on breezy days when the wind picks up pollen and carries it through the air. Rainy days, on the other hand, cause a drop in the pollen counts because the rain washes away the allergens.

Spring allergy symptoms include:

- Runny nose
- Watery eyes
- Sneezing
- Coughing
- Itchy eyes and nose
- Dark circles under the eyes

Common allergy triggers include:

- Pollen
- Animal Dander
- Dust Mites
- Molds
- Insect Stings
- Foods

If you've never been formally diagnosed with allergies but you notice that your eyes and nose are itchy and runny during the spring months, see your doctor.



Doctors treat spring allergies with a number of over-the-counter and prescription drugs. Over-the-counter allergy drugs are effective for many people and include the following:

- **Antihistamines** reduce sneezing, sniffing, and itching by lowering the amount of histamine (the substance produced during an allergic reaction) in the body.
- **Decongestants** clear mucus out of the nasal passageways to relieve congestion and swelling.
- **Nasal spray decongestants** relieve congestion and may clear clogged nasal passages faster than oral decongestants.
- **Cromolyn sodium nasal spray** can help prevent hay fever by stopping the release of histamine before it can trigger allergy symptoms.
- **Eye drops** relieve itchy, watery eyes.

It's nearly impossible to completely avoid spring allergies if you live in an area where plants grow. However, you can ease sniffing, sneezing, and watery eyes by avoiding your main allergy triggers.

- Try to stay indoors whenever the pollen count is very high (pollen counts usually peak in the mornings).
- Keep windows closed whenever possible during the spring months to keep allergens out. An air purifier may also help.
- Clean the air filters in your home often. Also, clean bookshelves, vents, and other places where pollen can collect.