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September 24, 2012

WELLNESS WEEKLY

Fall Allergies

Though flowers no longer bloom and the air turns crisp and cool, many allergy sufferers get no reprieve during the fall months. The allergy triggers might be slightly different, but they can be just as misery-inducing as the flower pollen that fills the air in the spring and summer.

What Causes Fall Allergies?

Plants release tiny cells called pollen into the air. When these pollen or other allergy triggers get into the noses of certain people, their immune system mistakenly sees them as foreign invaders and releases antibodies. The antibodies attack the allergens, which leads to the release of histamines into the blood. Histamines trigger the runny nose, itchy eyes, and other symptoms of allergies.

During the fall season, ragweed is the biggest allergy trigger. Though the yellow-flowering weed typically begins pollinating in August, it can linger well into the fall months. About three-quarters of people who are allergic to spring pollen-producing plants are also allergic to ragweed. Ragweed pollen can travel for hundreds of miles on the wind, so even if it doesn't grow where you live, it can still make you miserable if you're allergic to it.

Mold is another culprit, because its spores can easily get airborne. Mold thrives in damp areas, both indoors and outdoors. Damp leaves that line yards and streets in the fall are breeding grounds for mold, as are damp basements and bathrooms at home.

Dust mites -- microscopic, spider-like insects -- are yet another common indoor allergen. They are most prevalent during the humid summer months, but can get stirred into the air the first time you turn on your furnace in the fall. From the air, dust mites can make their way into your nose, triggering sneezes.

What are the Symptoms of Fall Allergies?

Allergy symptoms caused by ragweed, pollen, or mold are called allergic rhinitis (hay fever). These symptoms include:

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



How are Fall Allergies Treated?

To treat a runny nose, watery eyes, and itchiness, you can try one of these medications:

- Prescription corticosteroids, usually given in the form of a nasal spray, reduce inflammation in the nose.
- Antihistamines reduce sneezing, sniffing, and itching by blocking the action 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.
- Allergy shots expose your body to gradually increasing doses of the allergen until you become tolerant to it. They can relieve your symptoms for a longer period of time than oral and nasal allergy medications. Although they don't work for everyone, in people who do see a response, allergy shots can hold off symptoms for a few years.

Even though you can buy some allergy medications without a prescription, it's a good idea to talk to your doctor first to make sure you choose the right medication. Some antihistamines can make you feel sleepy, so you need to be careful when taking them during the day (although non-drowsy formulations are also available). Read the packaging label -- some of these products are only meant to be used for a few days.