



## Seasonal Allergic Rhinitis

Spring is traditionally a time of rebirth, filled with blooming flowers and warm, sunny days, but the season also marks the beginning of months of sneezing, wheezing and sinus congestion for many individuals. The warm weather and bursting blooms mean the release of countless airborne pollens and molds. It's the beginning of the spring allergy season. From February or March through October, microscopic pollen grains from trees, grasses, weeds, and mold spores take flight and eventually find their way into our airways. While these tiny "invaders" are necessary for the plant regeneration that occurs each spring, they mean nothing but trouble for millions of Americans.

Pollens and mold can trigger seasonal allergic rhinitis, commonly called hay fever. In fact, nearly 36 million people in the U.S. alone suffer from seasonal allergic rhinitis, which causes more than eight million physician visits yearly for various troublesome symptoms. An allergy is an abnormal reaction to an ordinarily harmless substance, such as pollen or mold. Simply, it's an overreaction to something the body views as an "invader." When an allergen such as a pollen grain enters the body and comes in contact with the lining of the nose, the immune system of an allergic individual initiates a chain reaction to protect itself. White blood cells, known as lymphocytes, produce antibodies which cause the release of chemical mediators such as histamine. Histamine and other chemicals cause the classic allergy symptoms, including runny nose, water eyes and sneezing.

While different areas of the country and the world experience varying pollen seasons, there is rarely an escape from seasonal allergies altogether. People with allergies have an inherited, genetic tendency to produce IgE, the allergic antibody, in response to different substances. For some people, pollen and mold have this effect. For others, it's dust mites and cat dander. When an allergic person moves to a new area to try to escape their allergies, exposure to different allergens in the new location will likely result in a new set of allergy triggers over time. You can't hide from allergies.

And while pollen seasons wax and wane in different areas among different plant species, molds are present almost everywhere and at any time. Outdoors, they can be found in soil, vegetation and rotting wood. Inside, they are found in attics, basements, bathrooms, refrigerators and other food storage areas, garbage cans, carpets and upholstery. Weather does affect pollen and mold distribution. Rainy and windless days can alleviate allergic rhinitis symptoms, while hot, dry, and windy conditions signal heavy pollen and mold distribution and increased allergic symptoms.

Considering its broad reach, genetic link and potentially severe symptoms, seasonal allergies represent a major portion of today's health concerns. So before you get to the bottom of your next box

of tissues, get your allergies under control. Contact your allergist. He or she can provide testing, environmental control measures, and medications that can relieve the symptoms of allergic rhinitis or other allergies by preventing the release of histamine in the body. Newer antihistamines offer fewer unwanted side effects, such as drowsiness, and are available by prescription. Decongestants can also treat nasal congestion and other symptoms by clearing nasal passages, while bronchodilators can relieve coughing, wheezing and difficulty in breathing. Other anti-inflammatory agents can also aid in reducing airway inflammation.

Successful treatment of allergies includes early detection to avoid unnecessary suffering, proper use of medications, and allergen avoidance whenever possible. Ignoring or tolerating seasonal allergy symptoms can lead to more serious conditions, such as asthma, sinusitis, and other allergic diseases. So don't tolerate your symptoms. Get them treated!

### **Did you know?**

- Pollens are small, round-shaped male cells of flowering trees, grasses and weeds.
- The average pollen particle is less than the width of a human hair.
- Brightly colored, perfumed flowers such as roses are less likely to cause allergic reactions because their pollen is too large, heavy and sticky to travel in the air.
- Pollens can remain on your skin and hair for hours after spending time outdoors.
- The amount of pollen that trees release in the spring is determined the previous fall.
- The plant most responsible for triggering allergic reactions in the fall is ragweed.
- Pollens can travel as far as 400 miles and up to two miles high in the air.
- Plants have pollination cycles which are consistent from year to year, though weather conditions can affect the amount of pollen in the air at any time.
- Trees pollinate earliest, followed by grasses. Weeds pollinate last. Pollens vanish after the first hard frost for most regions.