



Allergy care for the family

What Is Your "Pollen Profile?"

Television commercials will call it the hay fever season, although hay won't be causing most of the sniffles and fever is rarely an allergy symptom. Folks with stuffy noses may point to yellow clouds of pine pollen billowing off wind-blown boughs, but they too will be off-target in finding the source of their misery.

During the late winter and early spring months, many allergy sufferers will see a seasonal resurgence in their symptoms. This may be caused by clouds of invisible tree pollens being released into the air as mother nature blows a new breath of life into the tree kingdom. Unfortunately what is good for growing trees may be quite irritable to those with allergies.

By adopting a broad strategy to eliminate or control the pollens in their environment and treat allergy symptoms before they get out of control, allergy sufferers will be able to look forward to the transition from winter to spring, instead of dreading the seasonal change as a rite of passage which must be endured.

The first step may be learning what, if any, pollens a person is allergic to. An allergist's help is essential in diagnosis, as there are a wide variety of pollens in the air and not all of them cause problems.

A technique called skin prick testing, which is no more painful than a mosquito bite, can test for allergies to a number of pollens that are prevalent this time of year, and yield a "profile" of the pollens that a particular patient is allergic to. This will then help in formulating a treatment plan.

Testing may reveal that tree pollens are not even at fault! In the early spring months grass pollens begin to emerge, and there are other aeroallergens, such as mold spores, that are prevalent this time of year.

Many allergy sufferers in this Piney Woods region are quick to blame the pine tree, which grows thick as grass in these parts and is known to paint entire counties with its profuse discharge of golden pollen. Actually pine pollen is not much of an allergy threat. The hardwoods, junipers, and cypresses are all bigger allergy culprits, and are pumping out equal or greater volumes of invisible pollen this time of year.

Living in a wooded region and close to vast national forests will make it virtually impossible to avoid a particular pollen grain outdoors, as pollen can drift for miles on air currents. During the peak of allergy season, it may be best to avoid the outdoors altogether. Keeping windows closed, and using air conditioning in the car and at home can limit a person's exposure to pollen. Also High Efficiency Particulate Air (HEPA) and electrostatic filters are very effective in culling pollen from the air indoors. Most allergy symptoms fade shortly after a person removes themselves from the pollen-rich environment which was causing them problems.

A patient who is not willing to do their part to control their environment is wasting a lot of time and money on medicine and doctor's office visits which cannot alone eliminate allergy problems.

This may be a good time of year to schedule a vacation to an area which does not have pollens which are bothering a patient. Since there are pollens of some kind everywhere, it is not advisable to move to another region. "Even if temporary relief is found in a new home," warns Dr. Bethea, "it is likely new allergies will develop within a couple years."

If the problems are true tree pollen allergies, and not a reaction to changing weather conditions, the doctor may be able to prescribe a combination of over-the-counter and prescription medications tailored to a patient's specific needs. The allergist can provide desensitization, through use of allergy shots, to reduce the body's sensitivity to almost any airborne allergen, including grass pollens and molds.

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