

ALLERGIES

As the trees start to bloom and the pollen gets airborne, allergy sufferers begin their annual ritual of sniffing and sneezing. You may have been struggling with allergies for years, but that doesn't mean you can't learn a few new tricks about coping with them. Seasonal and other indoor/outdoor allergies aren't just annoying, they can affect your quality of life. It can lead to sinus infections, disrupt your sleep and affect your ability to be productive. Airborne allergens also can trigger asthma attacks which can be dangerous and even life-threatening.

About 40 million people in the U.S. have some type of "indoor/outdoor" allergy, known as seasonal allergies. The biggest allergy trigger is pollen -- tiny grains released into the air by trees, grasses, and weeds. When pollen grains get into the nose of someone who's allergic the immune system goes into overdrive.



Symptoms

Allergy symptoms tend to be particularly high on breezy days when the wind picks up pollen and carries it through the air. Pollen can travel for miles, spreading a path of misery for allergy sufferers along the way. The higher the pollen count, the greater the misery. Rainy days, on the other hand, cause a drop in the pollen count because the rain washes away the allergens. Common allergy symptoms include:

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

Diagnosis

If you've never been formally diagnosed with spring allergies but you notice that your eyes and nose are itchy and runny, see your doctor. Your doctor may refer you to an allergist for tests. The allergy specialist may do a skin test, which involves injecting a tiny sample of a diluted allergen just under the skin of your arm or back. If you're allergic to the substance, a small red bump will form. Just because you are sensitive to a particular allergen on a test, though, doesn't mean that you'll necessarily start sneezing and coughing when you come into contact with it.

Treatment

Although there is no magical cure for allergies, there are a number of ways to combat them, from medication to household habits. Doctors treat allergies with a number of over-the-counter and prescription drugs. Over-the-counter allergy drugs are effective for many people. Some allergy sufferers turn to natural therapies for relief, although the research is mixed on their effectiveness. Just because an allergy treatment says “natural” doesn’t mean that it is safe. It’s a good idea to talk to your doctor first to make sure you choose the right medication or herbal remedy.

It’s nearly impossible to completely avoid allergies. However, here are a few tips:



- Try to stay indoors whenever the pollen count is very high (pollen counts usually peak in the mornings). If you are going to be working outside, consider wearing a protective allergy face mask and take your allergy medication in advance so it will have a chance to get into your system before the pollen does.
- Keep your doors and windows closed whenever possible to keep allergens out.
- Use an air purifier.
- Clean the air filters in your home often at least every spring and early summer.
- Clean bookshelves, vents, and other places where pollen can collect.
- Wash your hair after going outside, because pollen can collect there.
- Vacuum twice a week using a HEPA filter. Wear a mask because vacuuming can kick up pollen, mold, and dust that were trapped in your carpet.
- Keep the windows shut and set your ventilation to recirculate when in your car.

Follow these few tips and enjoy the beautiful weather before it's over!