



Pass the Tissue *Allergens are in the air*

Spring is in the air – and so are a lot of other substances that may be causing itchy, watery eyes, a runny nose and sneezing. If you have allergies, your body's delicate balance can be knocked out of kilter by hundreds of environmental triggers: animals, plants, foods and medicines, to name a few.

Approximately 50 million individuals in the United States suffer from some form of allergies, and that number is growing. The cause of an allergy is not always known, but a family history of allergies is thought to be a primary risk factor.

An allergy is a reaction by your body's immune system to something that does not typically bother other people, according to the National Institutes of Health. Simply put, your body's defense system sees a certain substance – called an allergen – as a threat, and releases antibodies to fight it. Usually, people who have allergies have increased sensitivity to more than one allergen or group of allergens, such as certain types of grass and trees, dust and lint, pollen and mold, and animal fur. The most common food allergies are the proteins in cow's milk, eggs, peanuts, wheat, soy, fish, shellfish and tree nuts.

Visit www.themedcenter.net and click on *Health Resources* to take an interactive *Allergies or Asthma Awareness Quiz*, *Food Allergies* or *Mold Allergies* quizzes – or learn how the area you live can affect your health using the *Asthma Zone Calculator*.

Allergic symptoms vary from person to person, can be seasonal or year-round, and reactions can range from mild discomfort to life-threatening (particularly in the case of severe food allergies). Some people are born with allergies, while others develop them later in life.

Specific types of allergic diseases include allergic rhinitis (hay fever), sinusitis (swelling of the sinuses), serous otitis media (an allergic ear problem), conjunctivitis (red, itchy eyes), hives (itchy, red bumps), asthma (coughing or difficulty breathing), or anaphylaxis – a serious allergic reaction usually caused by a food, insect sting or exposure to certain chemicals, such as latex. Anaphylaxis arises quickly and causes mild to severe symptoms: warmth, tingling in the mouth, a rash, faintness, shortness of breath, cramps, vomiting, diarrhea, even a drop in blood pressure resulting in loss of consciousness or shock. If not immediately treated with an injection of epinephrine, this type of allergic reaction can be fatal.

If you think you have an allergy, your family physician can refer you to a specialist such as an ear/nose/throat doctor (ENT) or an allergist/immunologist. An allergist/immunologist is an internal medicine physician, or a specialist in ear, nose and throat problems, with additional, specialized training in the diagnosis and treatment of allergies, asthma and autoimmune diseases. He or she will review your medical history, perform testing to determine the nature and severity of an allergy, and develop a treatment plan.

A variety of options are available for treating allergies: over-the-counter remedies (oral medication, topical creams or nasal sprays) prescription medication, or allergy shots. The right course of treatment depends on the severity and frequency of your symptoms. Allergy shots work like a vaccine, by exposing you to a small dose of the allergen, to build your resistance. Allergy shots are usually reserved for more severe, recurrent symptoms that do not respond to other treatment.

To learn more, visit www.themedcenter.net and click on the *Health Resources* link to take an interactive *Allergies* or *Asthma Awareness quiz*, *Food Allergies* or *Mold Allergies quizzes*, or learn how the area you live can affect your health using the *Asthma Zone Calculator*. Contact one of our doctors or specialists today to help design a treatment plan that's right for you.

Remember that this information is not intended to replace the advice of your doctor, but rather to increase awareness and help equip patients with information to facilitate conversations with their physician.

Avoiding Allergens

Here are some simple steps you can take on your own to control your allergy symptoms – in addition to any physician-prescribed treatment methods.

Stay tuned to the forecast. The National Allergy Bureau (www.aaaai.org/nab/index.cfm) reports current pollen and mold spore levels around the country. You can check the forecast for your area, and sign up for e-mail alerts.

Remain indoors during peak pollen periods. When outdoor pollen levels are highest – particularly sunny, windy days – consider staying indoors with the windows closed during the morning hours.

Protect your nose and mouth. If you must go outdoors, consider wearing a face mask designed to filter pollen out of the air and prevent it from reaching nasal passages.

Use your home and car air filtering systems. Your home and car air conditioners can help keep out pollen and mold allergens when placed on the 'do-not-circulate' mode. HEPA and other special air filters are available to help reduce allergens produced in the home.

Sources: American Academy of Allergy, Asthma & Immunology www.aaaai.org, National Institutes of Health www.nih.gov, Web MD www.webmd.com