Pollen Overload Equals Itchy Eyes, Runny Nose

By Susan Camp

Do you spend the first weeks of every spring with itchy eyes, a runny nose, and a hacking cough? Even worse, you can't stop sneezing, and you sometimes have sinus pressure and a headache? To compound the problem, since the COVID pandemic, everyone is more self-conscious about coughing, sneezing, and nose-blowing in public.

If the uncomfortable symptoms recur every year in March or April, chances are good that you are suffering from seasonal allergies, commonly called hay fever, although in most cases, the symptoms have nothing to do with exposure to hay. Rather, seasonal pollen production, chiefly from trees in April, May, and June causes the uncomfortable symptoms. Grass pollen appears during the summer, and in the fall, the dreaded ragweed is the primary culprit. An allergic reaction occurs when your body identifies a normally harmless substance as a dangerous invader that must be repelled.

Hay fever is allergic rhinitis, or inflammation of the lining of the nasal passages, caused by an allergic reaction to the seasonal pollen, although, dust mites, pet dander, and mold and fungi spores can cause similar symptoms. If you suffer from hay fever symptoms throughout the year, seasonal pollen may not be the only cause of your discomfort. Besides the symptoms mentioned previously, some people develop a post-nasal drip and have difficulty sleeping, which makes them feel fatigued during the day.

You have may have heard the local TV meteorologists report each night on the pollen count for that day and which pollen is most prevalent. Did you know that there is a National Allergy Map at a site called pollen.com? You can type in your zip code and see information on the daily pollen count in your area or anywhere in the United States, helpful information if you are planning to travel this summer.

In Eastern Virginia, the pollen of river birch and various oak and maple species are the primary springtime causative agents until later in the summer when the grasses produce their pollen. The pollen of Bermuda, Kentucky bluegrass, and Johnson grass, and various other grasses cause the summertime discomfort.

The primary agent in the fall appears to be ragweed pollen. The long-held belief that goldenrod (Solidago spp.) causes autumn hay fever has been debunked in recent years. Although ragweed (Ambrosia spp.) and goldenrod both are members of the Aster family, ragweed is the real villain when it comes to fall hay fever.

Although the two plants are superficially similar and grow along roadsides and on disturbed land, goldenrod is the one with the showy yellow plumes of flowers, while ragweed is scragglier and less attractive. The difference in the flowers of the two plants helps to explain why ragweed is the one that causes symptoms in so many people every fall.

Flowering plants tend to disperse pollen in one of two ways: by animals or by wind. Animal-pollinated plants have colorful flowers that attract bees, butterflies, hummingbirds, and other pollinators. Their pollen is large and sticky and adheres to the pollinators' bodies. Wind-pollinated plants lack showy flowers, and their pollen is fine and light and easily inhaled by humans. The wind-dispersed pollen of ragweed is primarily responsible for fall hay fever, but the showier goldenrod takes the blame.

There is no way to prevent hay fever, although you can take measures to reduce the pollen count and dust inside your house by regular cleaning and vacuuming; remaining indoors as much as possible; and running the air conditioner during high pollen count periods. A HEPA filter on the air conditioner unit help decrease pollen levels. Over the counter (OTC) oral medications, eye drops, and nasal sprays can help relieve symptoms.

Find helpful information on allergic rhinitis at www.mayoclinic.com and www.myclevelandclinic.com. Contact your primary care provider if over-the-counter allergy medications don't relieve your symptoms, if they become worse, or if you have difficulty breathing or suffer from asthma or another chronic respiratory condition. See the National Wildlife Organization Blog post "The Goldenrod Allergy Myth."