

Spring sneeze: Seasonal allergies around the corner

Mitigate allergy misery with early treatment

Jon Kelvey, Carroll County Times

6:08 a.m. EDT, April 5, 2015

Spring weather is finally here. Soon the trees will be budding, the grass growing ... and the wind will blow their pollen around making life miserable for those with spring allergies, a vernal wonderland of congestion, itching eyes and sneezing.

If you have the misfortune to suffer from seasonal allergies — a condition you share with as many as 40 million Americans, **according to the Asthma and Allergy Foundation of America** — you don't have to take it lying down. According to area physicians, there are things you can do now to prepare yourself for nature's assault on your sinuses.

"If you have had symptoms every year and April comes around, it warrants starting now," said Dr. Wendy Miller, a general practitioner with Carroll Health Group in Eldersburg.

Over-the-counter antihistamines, such as Claritin or Zyrtec, can be taken before the symptoms start and prevent the sinus tissues from becoming irritated to begin with, according to Miller, so long as they are taken as directed.

"Don't just wing it and take four or five; the instructions are pretty helpful on doses, ages and time to try it before seeking further evaluation," she said. "Use your sources — pharmacists are helpful."

There are also steroidal nasal sprays, such as Flonase and Nasacort, which have recently been approved for over-the-counter usage, according to Dr. Hunter Spotts, medical director of the Perry Hall Patient First urgent care center.

"Those are the ones you need a little more anticipation in terms of starting, because for those to be effective, you have to use them pretty much every day and it takes a week or two to build up an effect," he said.

If you've maxed out on Claritin and even the nasal steroids have failed to reduce symptoms, there is also the option of immunotherapy, or an allergy shot, but according to Spotts, it's a fairly involved process.

"That involves seeing an allergist that does some skin testing to see exactly what is triggering your allergies, and then they have to formulate a shot that basically exposes your immune system to those things so as to desensitize you," he said. "They have to custom make a shot for each person they treat; it's for when all else fails."

A pharmaceutical arms race with the plant kingdom is not the only strategy to reduce the symptoms and mitigate the misery of spring allergies, according to Spotts. There are also a

number of behavioral changes that can help reduce exposure without or in conjunction with medications.

"In terms of non-drug precautions, what we are getting this time of year is mostly tree pollen that will be floating around in the air and getting on you," Spotts said. "Obviously people want to get outside, but once you come back inside, you want to make sure you are not bringing in all that stuff and getting it into your furniture and constantly exposing yourself."

Changing clothes and even taking a shower when coming in from a substantial period of time outdoors can help keep the pollen outdoors and off of your couch. And for that matter, Spotts said, so can keeping your windows closed.

"Make sure you have changed the filters in your house," he said. "Run your AC as that helps filter out all the pollen that is coming indoors. It's all about minimizing your exposure."

Similarly, flushing eyes or even the sinuses with water or saline with something like a Neti pot can help minimize exposure to pollen, according to Miller. And she has also seen some patients have success with eating local honey, though in that case it's a different strategy being employed.

"I always recommend the nasal saline; it cleans things out and moisturizes," she said. "As far as eating honey, you will get different approaches. Some people it may help, but it depends on how powerful your immune response is to the allergen. ... I'm all for naturopathic things as long as they work."

Sometimes people have a hard time determining if they have a cold or are experiencing seasonal allergies, according to Spotts, which can arise in people who may not have had allergies before and are unsure what they are experiencing.

"With a cold, you can sometimes get a fever. You do not get a fever with allergies and a cold will get better no matter what you do — a few days, a couple of weeks, it will go away," Spotts said. "The allergy symptoms will persist for the entire time you are being exposed and will have a prolonged course."

It's entirely possible for someone to develop seasonal allergies that has not had them before, Miller said, especially if they have recently moved to a new area with different plant life. But whether it's a cold or allergies, she said symptoms that last more than two weeks should be checked out by a physician.

"Unfortunately, people who have these symptoms, they have the constant mucus production and it increases the dangers of getting a sinus infection," she said. "If you try these [treatments] and after a couple of weeks, your symptoms are not getting better or they are getting worse, then you need to be seen. Over-the-counter treatment is great, but you don't want to let it go on and on."

jon.kelvey@carrollcountytimes.com

410-857-3317

twitter.com/jonkelvey

Copyright © 2015, Carroll County Times