

Coping with Seasonal Allergies

by Fred Lewis, M.D., Board Certified Allergist & Immunologist

With the meteorological onset of spring having just passed, we need to turn our attention to the local flora and the onset of the Spring pollination season. The recent warm temperatures have led some people to note crocuses poking their through the soil and the return of the robins and cardinals. A few buds on the trees have opened but the bulk are waiting until the next warm spell to start pollination.

Typically, one needs to see a warm spell followed by a cold period followed by another warm-up. At that point, we would expect to see pollen in the air which would produce average allergy symptoms in susceptible individuals.

How do you know if you have allergies? Take this short quiz.

- * Have you been sneezing a lot lately ?
- * Are there certain times of the year when your nose is very itchy ?
- * Are your eyes watering and / or red ?
- * Do you have a runny nose with clear drainage ?
- * Are you wheezing and coughing?

If you have answered yes to many of these questions, it is likely you are allergic to something in the Spring. It is typically the tree and grass pollen that can cause difficulty. The onset of pollination in the Spring is dependent on the return of the warm weather.

If you develop symptoms such as sneezing, runny nose, stuffiness, cough, wheezing, etc., there are a number of things you can do to decrease your misery. The three main therapeutic interventions for allergy are avoidance, medications, and allergy shots.

Therapy usually starts with avoidance of your allergy triggers. For year-round allergens, such as dust mites, animals, mold, etc., avoidance can be helpful. It is more difficult to avoid pollen in the air. Staying indoors with air conditioning can help to decrease exposure and lessen symptoms but that isn't practical if you need to be out and about. If one needs to be outdoors for any length of time, a pollen mask can be helpful.

The second modality of therapy is medication. There are a number of over the counter medications that can be helpful. Second generation antihistamines such as cetirizine, loratadine, or fexofenadine , may block symptoms with only minimal side effects. Recently, nasal steroid sprays have become available without a prescription, as well. If these medications do not help or cause side effects that you can't tolerate, there are a number of prescription medications that may be helpful.

If avoidance and / or medications do not control symptoms or cause side effects, one may consider allergy shots (immunotherapy). The relief from symptoms with allergy shots is not immediate however. It can take 6 - 12 months for benefits to occur.

Immunotherapy is the only disease modifying therapy currently available to turn off the allergy response. The traditional way to administer immunotherapy is with allergy shots. Small amounts of allergen are administered weekly. The amount of allergen is usually increased until the point in the allergic person is attenuated.

Recently, another way of administering immunotherapy has been approved. Tablets containing allergen can be placed under the tongue. This is currently available for grass and ragweed allergy. The pros and cons of each modality of therapy should be discussed with your allergist.

If one is allergic, one can monitor the levels of pollen in the air by visiting the Olean Medical Group's website. Local pollen counts are posted daily. They are also published daily in the Times Herald on the weather page. There is equipment on the roof of the Olean Medical Group building which monitors the levels of pollen and mold in the air.

The information reported on a daily basis is for the previous 24 hours, since the information is obtained after the collector has run for 24 hours. While the absolute values may vary greatly from day to day, the trends are useful to predict the levels of expected discomfort for allergy sufferers.

There are many good therapies for your allergy symptoms. If you are bothered by your symptoms, consult your primary care provider or your allergist to help you decided which approach is right for you.

Dr. Fred Lewis is board certified in allergy and immunology and has been practicing at the Olean Medical Group since 1983. He received his medical degree from New York Medical College and followed with an internship at Beth Israel Hospital, New York, NY. He completed his residency in internal medicine at Internal Medicine, Beth Israel Hospital, New York, NY, where he served as Assistant Chief Resident and then finished with a two year fellowship in Allergy at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI. He and his wife live in Allegany, NY.