

Plan Ahead for Spring Allergies

K. W. Scarbrough, OD
Eagle Eye Vision Care, PS

Despite snow or rain, Mother Nature will have her way. Spring means pollen, and pollen means allergies. The Northwest has more than its share of pollen bearing months. Allergy sufferers have a variety of approaches to help get them through the season.

The allergy starts in January with the smaller shrubs: hazelnut and maple. In February and March the big guns, cedar and alder, bloom. These put out large amounts of pollen to which even the mildly allergic react. Birch and cottonwood follow in April. Just as the trees are done pollinating, the grasses begin to bloom. Many blame the Scotch broom but it is actually the grasses and weeds which grow alongside it that are responsible for the allergy symptoms of scratchy eyes and nose, sniffles, raspy voice, itchy skin, and aching sinuses.

Allergists prefer stopping allergies at the nose rather than using oral medications so nasal steroids are often prescribed. These dosages are very small and locally administered; the side effects are less serious than with oral steroids. These must be used consistently, however, for best outcome. Some people also get relief with simple nasal irrigators otherwise known as Neti pots. While a little cumbersome the relief can be profound simply from rinsing the pollens out of the sinuses.

Most allergy sufferers know about the over-the-counter oral medications such as Zyrtec and Claritin. These are second-generation antihistamines and usually cause far less sleepiness than the earlier generation medications such as Benadryl. Benadryl, however, can be very helpful for short-term use when sleep is difficult. Unfortunately even these second-generation products do have side effects, namely dryness. They dry out eyes, mouths, noses, and skin. Sometimes painful dry eyes and nosebleeds can be result.

Eye allergies are poorly treated with oral medications. That is because the cells causing allergies in the eyes are slightly different than in the nose and throat. Eye drops are available over-the-counter or prescription strength. These apply the medicine directly to the affected area. The drops have two methods of action: immediate and cumulative. The immediate effect helps to stop itching. The cumulative effect adds to overall relief, however, by toughening the cells containing histamine, the chemical which causes allergies. These tougher cells do not release the histamine as readily when exposed to pollen. It takes about two weeks for maximum impact so drops should be started before the season really takes off then continued throughout.

Allergy shots involve a great commitment in time and money. These are reserved for year-round allergies of the more severe type.

Environmental support within the home such as HEPA filters, dust management, and keeping windows closed are helpful adjuncts and allow less medication to be taken. Taking an antihistamine before exposure such as cutting the grass also helps. Washing pollen off after being outside is a good idea, too.

Allergies can be mild or life threatening. Please see your allergist or eye doctor for determining the best treatment plan for you.