

How to Survive Spring Allergy Season

Spring is in the air. From weeds to spores to grass and tree pollens, the warm weather is almost here, driving airborne allergen levels through the roof. That means your allergy symptoms -- the sniffing, sneezing, and itchy eyes -- are in overdrive and apt to stay that way for months.

Top allergy experts answer the 9 most pressing questions on treatment, care, and prevention of spring allergies to help you find some much-needed relief this season.



• How do I know what I'm allergic to?

The allergy skin test is the quickest, most inexpensive, and most accurate way to find out what you are allergic to, whether it's mold, grass pollen, or a type of weed. Talk with your primary care doctor or an allergist. Both can give you an allergy test. The skin is pricked slightly to allow an allergen, such as grass or mold, to enter the outer layer; after about 15 to 20 minutes, the physician will check for a reaction, such as hives or redness and swelling, which will identify the specific allergen causing your symptoms.

• How can I manage my allergies using over-the-counter medication?

Spring allergy relief is within your reach -- on your local drugstore's shelves. Start by taking an over-the-counter, non-sedating antihistamine, such as generic Claritin or Zyrtec, every morning. If your nose remains congested, add a saline nasal rinse or oral decongestant pill (if you don't have high blood pressure). You can also take a long-acting decongestant nose spray for a few days, if necessary. If these treatments don't clear your nasal congestion, ask your doctor about adding a corticosteroid nose spray.

Look for antihistamine on the label when shopping for eyedrops; these treat the root of your allergy symptoms, instead of eyedrops that just relieve the redness (also known as decongestant eyedrops). If you do buy the latter, be sure you don't use them for more than two to three days -- over time you will need more and more to relieve the redness.

• Beyond medication, what can I do to manage my allergies?

First, think practically. Try to avoid your triggers altogether by keeping your windows closed, even on an inviting spring day. That's when allergen levels are at their peak. Next, take a shower after you've spent time outdoors.

Allergens such as pollen tend to stick to fabrics, which means you can deposit allergens from your clothes on your furniture, on your pillow, and on the people around you. All of a sudden the safe haven of your home is as allergy-ridden as the outdoors. So wash your bedding, your pajamas, and your clothes as often as

possible to rid them of troublesome allergens during the spring season.

• What about the natural and alternative remedies I hear about: Do any work?

If you're looking for a home-remedy approach for your springtime allergies, start simple: A saltwater nose spray can be a springtime allergy sufferer's all-natural ally. Mix 8 ounces of water with half a teaspoon of table salt in a squirt bottle. You can use this every morning when you wake up and in the evening to clear the allergens out of your nose. You can also buy a saline-solution nose spray at your local drugstore if you don't feel like whipping it up yourself.

Acupuncture, homeopathy, and herbal treatments are possible solutions to your spring allergy symptoms, but more research is needed first for a solid recommendation. If you are considering an alternative therapy for your spring allergies, start by talking to your doctor.

• Are antihistamines addictive too?

Here's one rumor that is not true. "People may be worried about antihistamines being addictive. But we are concrete on this one -- there is no way they are addictive," says allergy experts.

But while you won't get hooked on allergy medications such as antihistamines, either over-the-counter or prescription strength, you could build up a tolerance to them. The solution is to rotate the types of over-the-counter medications you take to ensure they give you the most bang for your buck. If you build up a tolerance, it will



happen after about three months or so. When you notice your symptoms coming back, switch to a different brand or type of allergy medication for a while until you either get through the season or lower your tolerance back to normal after a few months.

• I love the outdoors. How can I enjoy the warm weather with my allergies?

The trick to planting flowers or mowing the lawn on a pleasant spring day is not to treat your allergy symptoms, but to prevent them before they kick in.

Pretreat your allergies with an antihistamine about a half-hour before your day begins to avoid an allergy attack altogether and minimize your suffering. And don't be caught unprepared. Be sure to have "rescue" medications such as eyedrops and decongestants on standby -- just in case.

• When do I need prescription allergy medication?

You've jumped through hoops to manage your springtime allergies. You started with an allergy test to pinpoint your triggers, you've kept a watchful eye on pollen counts to avoid outdoor activities when the numbers spike, you've been taking extra showers when needed and doing laundry nonstop, and you've tried several over-the-counter allergy treatments. Your efforts, however, are not producing results, and you're still suffering from all the classic spring allergy symptoms. It's time to see your primary care doctor or an allergist.

Once you get started, you should have your allergies under control in just a week or two. Does this mean you can put your laundry soap away? Not quite. You still need to be vigilant in managing your allergies on your own, but now you can do it with prescription strength on your side.

All medications should be used as directed by your doctor, who will talk to you about how often, for how long, and at what dose you should take your allergy meds.

• Do I need allergy shots?

The same formula applies to prescription medications: If your allergy symptoms don't improve over time, the next step may be to take it up a notch with allergy shots. When you start the shots, generally given once or twice a week to begin, you'll probably stay on your prescription medicine to manage your symptoms. If you're like most people, by the time the next allergy season rolls around, you may have started to build up resistance and have milder symptoms.

• If I have allergies, will my kids have them too?

Unfortunately, the pollen doesn't fall far from the tree. In this case, family can be destiny. If one parent has allergies, then his child has a 33% chance of developing allergies. If both parents have allergies, then their child has a 67% chance. The experts' advice to avoid passing your allergies on to your kids, "Be careful whom you marry," half joking.