

## Coping with the Worst Allergy Season

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By Alyssa Sparacino

April showers are bringing more than just May flowers this year. The fast shift to a warmer climate after a wet winter is making for a rough allergy season for everyone — year-round and seasonal sufferers alike.

A recent survey from the American College of Allergy, Asthma and Immunology reported that 1 in 5 of about 500 allergy sufferers experienced symptoms daily. More than half of those surveyed complained of not feeling well throughout the day and having problems sleeping at night due to pesky symptoms like coughing, congestion or watery eyes.

But there's hope. Knowing what you're up against, understanding your individual triggers and taking a proactive role to relieve your symptoms will help you win the battle over whatever allergy ails you.

Kathleen R. May, M.D., practicing allergist in Cumberland, Maryland and spokeswoman for the American College of Allergy, Asthma and Immunology's "Find an Allergist Find Relief" campaign, says she's already getting a sense that

this allergy season will eclipse recent years.

To help, May weighs in on what allergy sufferers can do to gear up for the new season.

"There are things you can do for indoor allergies that are rather simple" she says.

- Keep humidity levels down. Below 40 to 45 percent is ideal to keep dust mites and mold spores at bay.
- Circulate clean air. Running an air conditioner instead of opening windows will prevent pollen from coming inside.
- Cover your mattresses and pillows
- Limit carpeting
- Ensure that your bathroom is well vented. If visible mold occurs, wipe with a bleach solution.
- Run a dehumidifier in the basement.
- Avoid basement bedrooms, as they are breeding grounds for indoor allergens and too much time spent downstairs could worsen symptoms.

In another survey from ACAAI, patients who reported seeing an allergist were "nearly three times more likely to say their treatment was effective than those who took over-the-counter medicine."

"Everyone absolutely needs to have testing done to see what their individual allergens are," May said.

## *Map Courtesy of the National Allergy Bureau*

Once you know your triggers, you can take action to prevent the onset of allergy symptoms, or prevent them from getting worse.

- Immunotherapy. Shots that are administered once or twice a week to start, then every two to four weeks at their peak and consist of a “recipe” of your specific allergens. This is your body’s way of getting used to the irritants gradually, so when you do come in contact with them later, you’ll be able to defend your immune system against the symptoms. “It’s important to understand that immunotherapy takes six to 12 months to take effect, so patients should seek this care well in advance,” May says.
- Start early. “The best thing someone can do is to know when the season starts in their area and begin regular medication about two weeks ahead of time,” she says. Get your prescription nasal sprays filled in advance.
- Genetics plays a role. If one parent has allergies, you have a 30 to 50 percent chance of developing them too. If both parents were sufferers, that statistic jumps to nearly 80 percent.

To assist with outdoor allergy symptoms:

- Shower directly after doing outside work, such as gardening or mowing the lawn.
- Wear a high filtration mask while outside.

- While riding in the car, use the air conditioning instead of rolling down the windows.
- Replace car air filters with designs that filter pollen as well.
- Avoid going outside when pollen counts are at their highest. This includes warm, sunny and windy days in the mid-morning to late-afternoon.
- Cleanse your nasal passages with a saline or salt water rinse using a Neti Pot or something similar

Effects from allergies — treated or untreated — can be prevented. When people can’t control their allergies or asthma, May says “it’s definitely not subtle. They can’t sleep well. They are miserable. They have trouble concentrating in school or at work. I tell people, ‘Don’t suffer, because it’s not necessary.’”

- Know your dealing with. May says she’s seen many patients who believe they have chronic sinus infections and are confused when antibiotics don’t work, but often times they are plagued with nasal allergies and weren’t aware of it. Those same people, could also have undiagnosed asthma.

“If you have nasal allergies, you are at a 40 percent lifetime risk of developing asthma,” May says. In severe cases, untreated asthma can result in chronic lung disease and irreversible damage to lung function.

The ACAAI's has set up more than 200 asthma screening locations across the country, where allergy sufferers can speak with a professional who will answer questions offer breathing tests.

“In these economic times, the allergy testing and treatment is more effective [than trying remedies on your own] because you don't spend so much time, effort and money on shotgun approaches,” May says.

“So many people have come into my office saying ‘I wish I had come here a long time ago. I can't believe how much better I feel.’”

Visit this Web site to find an allergist near you.

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