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## Living the Good Life — Even With Allergies

### Women's Guide to Conquering Allergies

If you're a woman dealing with allergies, find out how to conquer your symptoms and feel better.

WebMD Feature

By Jennifer Soong

Ah, warm weather. For allergy sufferers, that means an onslaught of symptoms, like sneezing, sniffing, red eyes, and runny noses. Plus, trying desperately to avoid allergy triggers at parks, playgrounds, and gardens.

An estimated 35 million people in the U.S. suffer from seasonal allergic rhinitis, or nasal allergies. Women are all too aware of when allergy season hits, because visible allergy symptoms may have them reaching for their makeup bags in a panic.

"Springtime — when things are growing — can be tough," says Julie Livingston, a public relations professional in the metro-NYC region, who has seasonal allergies.

She says her allergy symptoms can make her feel self-conscious. "My eyes often appear red and irritated," she says, "People will ask, 'Are you OK?' even when I'm not really sick."

But there's no reason for you to sit back and surrender to allergies this season. Fight back with WebMD's arsenal of practical advice for conquering allergies and embracing springtime without a tissue box in hand.

### Allergies? It's Not Just You

Year after year, many women cope with allergies — sometimes without even realizing it. Common complaints include nasal congestion, scratchy throat, itchy eyes and allergic shiners, dark circles that appear beneath the eyes and puffiness in the upper face.

"We found over 80% of women didn't realize that the allergic shiners could be attributed to allergies and sinus problems," says Clifford Bassett, MD, medical director of Allergy & Asthma Care of New York and on faculty at the NYU School of Medicine. "So they use cosmetics and foundation to cover it up, but with treatment, it actually can improve and go away. They can look and feel better."

"The bottom line is allergies are 100% treatable," he says. "People don't need to suffer. If you're having symptoms and it's persistent and bothersome, then see an allergist and get tested. It's very simple. Then you can approach the problem much more definitively and exactly based on your needs."

Quality of life issues can affect your daily activities, says Kathleen May, MD, an allergist in private practice in Cumberland, Md.

"If you can't sleep, and you're coughing all night and congested," she says, "you're not going to be very functional. A lot more people are miserable than realize it. They can do better."

"You'll hear people say, 'Oh, it's just my allergies,'" she says. "It's dismissed. But it's time to educate them that it's really more than a nuisance. Allergies are a serious problem and can be treated."

## **Allergies: Time to Take Action**

Sometimes people think they have a cold that just doesn't go away, May says. Allergies can mimic cold symptoms – and the chronic congestion or drainage you attribute to an illness can actually be signs of allergies.

The most common symptom of seasonal allergies is nasal congestion, or a stuffy nose, Bassett says. The difference is that colds typically come on suddenly, last 5 to 7 days and don't respond to most allergy medications.

The first step to treating allergies, Bassett says, is to confirm your diagnosis. Antihistamines and decongestants are the most common types of treatments used to alleviate allergy symptoms. Don't wait until symptoms kick in before taking your allergy medications. As the weather gets warmer, pollens and molds are released into the air. Check your local pollen forecasts and mark your calendar early in the year. Start early and prepare by taking allergy medications just before the allergy season starts.

"If you wait to start the medications, you're already losing a lot of sleep," May says.

## **How Allergies Impact Your Life**

Depending on where you live in the country, you might discover dust mite and mold allergies get worse in the spring and the fall — mimicking the peak cycles of seasonal allergies. That's why correctly identifying your allergy triggers early is important.

Some people who think they have seasonal allergies are very surprised to find they have a year-round allergy to dust mites or mold, May says. More than two-thirds of people actually have allergy symptoms year-round, according to the American College of Allergy, Asthma and Immunology (ACAAI).

"Dust mites like humidity so anytime it's rainy and damp, their populations increase," May says. "It coincides with growing season and aggravates the whole problem because people are not targeting the right allergen."

Allergies can also trigger asthma attacks. Allergic asthma is the most common type of asthma. Women are more prone to asthma than men, and are also more likely to require urgent care as a result. Common signs of asthma include wheezing, nighttime cough, or trouble breathing after exercise.

"When you have nasal allergies, your risk for asthma is about 40%, much higher than the general population," May says. "A lot of people with nasal allergies have ignored their respiratory symptoms thinking it's all part of their allergies. So they are not getting the right treatment."

"The good news is, if you can identify what those people are allergic to, and treat it appropriately, in many cases, the other problems like asthma and sinus problems, go away or improve greatly — and they can get back to having a normal life," she says.

## Quick Allergy Tips

Clifford Bassett, MD, allergist/immunologist in New York City, shares his top advice for breathing easier this allergy season:

- **Check the pollen forecast.** Stay indoors during midday when pollen counts are usually highest.
- **Wear big sunglasses** on a windy day to protect your eyes.
- **Keep your windows closed** and set your air conditioner on "re-circulate" to keep pollen out. Clean air filters frequently.
- **Shower at night** to rinse pollen from your body before you climb into bed.

### [View Article Source](#)

#### SOURCES:

- Julie Livingston, public relations professional in the NYC metropolitan area.
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- Kathleen May, MD, allergist in private practice in Cumberland, MD, and spokeswoman for ACAAI's "Find an Allergist, Find Relief" campaign.
- "New Asthma Estimates: Tracking Prevalence, Health Care and Mortality," National Center for Health Statistics, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2001.

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