

Easy or Sneezy?

A late winter means a delayed, but perhaps more severe allergy season in the Midwest

Experts believe the spring allergy season in the Midwest may be shorter but more intense because of the unusually late snow we saw this year.

Pollen - a fine powder produced by plants, trees, ryegrass, and ragweed - is the most prevalent allergen and the primary culprit for people sneezing and getting hives, itchy eyes and a runny or stuffy nose. And the delay in pollination this spring means folks in the Midwest are getting hit all at once.

"A lot of tree pollen right now," says Dr. Charles Frey, an adult and pediatric allergist for OSF HealthCare Medical Group, in Rockford. "Grass is just starting to pollinate, so levels are low now, but they'll probably be at a fairly high level in probably another two weeks. And, since tree season was late, you're having the compounding effect of having both the tree and grass pollen together along with the mold spores, which are also high right now."

It's estimated up to 50 million Americans have nasal allergies from pollen. However, complications like asthma attacks, induced by pollen, can prove fatal and lead to more than 20,000 emergency room visits each year in the US.

How do you know if you have an allergy? First, identify whether you are suffering from a cold or allergies. While many of the symptoms overlap — with a cold you may also have a fever, fatigue, cough, aches and pains.

If you suspect an allergy, Dr. Frey suggests starting with some environmental controls.

"You don't want to sleep with bedroom windows open at night where you have pollen and mold coming in," says Dr. Frey. "If you've been outside all day, in the pollen and the mold, before you go to bed at night it's a good idea to take a shower, wash all the pollen off your hair, off your face, so you're not getting it on the pillow and being exposed to it over and over again every night."

If that doesn't work, medications can greatly reduce or eliminate allergy symptoms, like an antihistamine. Many over-the-counter antihistamines are non-sedating or minimally sedating. If nasal symptoms are bad, consider a nasal spray or allergy eye drops.

Of course, with all physical symptoms, including those from allergies, see your physician to determine the best course of treatment. A referral to a specialist, like Dr. Frey, may be in order.

You should also know the sneezing seasons are not going to get any better. For a variety of reasons, including climate change, researchers estimate that US pollen counts of all varieties will double by the year 2040.