How to Cope with Fall Allergies

Fall is here, and for the 10 to 30 percent of the population who are sensitive to ragweed pollen, it also means runny noses and watery eyes. Ragweed season begins in August, peaks in September, and often lasts until November. “A cold spring and wet summer can progress into a ragweed season that wreaks havoc for many New Yorkers,” says Anthony Del Signore, MD, Assistant Professor in the Department of Otolaryngology, and Director of Rhinology and Endoscopic Skull Base Surgery, Mount Sinai Beth Israel. “When autumn temperatures persist well into the winter, ragweed season can become a lengthier issue for allergy sufferers.”

Ragweed pollen comes from many trees, weeds, and grasses. Since pollen grains are fine and light, they spread easily in the wind. Pollen counts are higher on warm, windy days, as compared to cool, rainy days that breed lower pollen counts. To track pollen counts, visit www.pollen.com.

Signs of Ragweed Allergy

If you are sensitive to ragweed pollen, your body will recognize the allergen as a threat. This triggers your immune system to release powerful chemicals called histamines that get rid of the allergen, but also cause symptoms, such as:

› Inflammation of the nasal cavity, lining, and structures, leading to difficulty breathing, pressure, pain, congestion, and even sinus infection.
› Nasal drip, runny nose, itchy and watery eyes.
› Asthma exacerbations, scratchy throat, and cough.
› Allergic reactions; some foods and herbs contain proteins that are similar to those in ragweed pollen, such as: bananas, melons, beans, potatoes, celery, and cucumbers.

How to Get Relief

Treatment for ragweed allergies begins with prevention and avoidance. Keep your house clean and frequently wash linens and clothes to minimize your daily exposure. Nasal saline washes also decrease pollen levels within the nasal cavity.

For many patients, medication is essential to surviving the season. Over-the-counter medication, such as antihistamines, decongestants, and nasal steroid sprays, are the first line of defense.

“Staying ahead of the pollen counts is important, so treat yourself before your symptoms get out of control,” advises Dr. Del Signore.

When to Visit a Physician

If your symptoms have persisted for more than three months, or become intolerable, an allergist or ear, nose, and throat (ENT) doctor can help you find relief.

Prescription strength medications may be needed. Allergy shots can also be used to slowly help patients become immune to yearly symptoms.

An allergist can test for allergens with either a blood or skin prick test. An ENT can rule out structural abnormalities within the nasal cavity that may exacerbate symptoms.

Questions to Ask Your Doctor About Allergies

› What medications are best to ease symptoms: over-the-counter or prescription drugs?
› Are there issues within my nose that are making the symptoms worse?
› Is this nasal drip a result of allergies or should I be concerned about something more?