

Off-the-charts pollen spreads allergy misery

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Pollen covers a car parked outside the State Capitol Tuesday, March 20, 2012, in Atlanta. A warm winter is sending pollen counts soaring to record levels in Georgia. Officials say a record high pollen count of 9,369 particles of pollen per cubic meter was measured in metro Atlanta on Tuesday. (AP Photo/David Goldman)

(AP) -- Allergy season has come early and hit with a wheezing vengeance in parts of the South and Midwest this year, thanks largely to an unusually warm winter. Abundant pollen is causing watery eyes, sniffles and sneezing.

Doctors say the spring misery stretches from [Mississippi](#) to Ohio and from Georgia to Texas, where a [drought](#) has exacerbated the problem. [Forecasters](#) and allergists blame the unseasonably [warm weather](#), and few cold snaps, for causing [plants](#) to bloom weeks earlier than normal and release the allergy-causing [particles](#).

In some areas, allergists say [pollen](#) counts this week are as high as they've ever recorded. A clinic at Vanderbilt University in Nashville recorded 11,000 [grains](#) of pollen per cubic meter Tuesday, the worst in the 12 years they've tracked the number. The Atlanta Allergy & Asthma Clinic says this week's pollen counts have beaten a high mark recorded there in April 1999. Their count for Tuesday was almost 9,400. Fifteen-hundred is considered very high.

The medical director of the Vanderbilt Asthma, Sinus and Allergy Program says he's been seeing more patients - even while feeling puny himself.

"I'm kind of sniffly today," Dr. David Hagaman said Tuesday.

The Asthma and Allergy Foundation of America says more than 40 million Americans have nasal allergies, popularly called hay fever. In severe cases, sufferers have difficulty breathing that can send them to the emergency room.

Stephanie Baxter was walloped when she returned to Gallatin, Tenn., from a vacation in Florida last week.

"We hit Tennessee and they started," she said. "I have every possible symptom you can have. I'm trying to keep my energy because I have a 3-month-old and a 3-year-old. There's no time for rest."

For three years, the foundation has ranked Knoxville, Tenn., as the worst city in the country for allergies - based on pollen counts, sales of allergy medications and the presence allergy specialists. The city has been up to 20 degrees warmer than normal the past few weeks. Spring arrived prematurely - along with sales of nose spray.

"It's blooming so early," said Sam Roberts, a meteorologist with the

National Weather Service in Morristown, Tenn. "Grass mowing has started early this year and stirred things up."

Ranee Randby, community relations director for the Knox County Health Department, said Knoxville's scenic location in the Tennessee valley contributes to the problem.

"We're surrounded by mountains and whatever gets in here stays in here. It's like a bowl," she said. "It's a beautiful, green part of the country but pollen comes with that."

In San Antonio, Texas, patients with allergies have increased in the past few weeks at Southwest General Hospital. Daniel St. Armand, the emergency room director, doesn't have to leave the hospital to find someone suffering.

"I have a friend who goes through this yearly and it affects his whole system," he said. "He constantly has a runny nose and itchy skin and eyes. He's just not himself."

In Atlanta, Andre Osborne returned home from a long weekend to find his black Infiniti sedan caked in yellow pollen.

"I feel terrible," he said. "I know it's not as bad as it can be. But the sneezing, the uncontrollable coughing, it's starting to kick in."

A couple miles away, business was up at Cactus Car Wash as drivers brought in their pollen-covered cars. Yellow water streamed into drains in its parking lot.

"It's very unusual this early on," said manager Jim James. "It's getting cars a lot dirtier, which is happier for us."

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