

The Medical Minute: Fall and winter bring allergy woes, too

October 11 2012

It's the time of year seasonal allergy sufferers anticipate relief with the first frost, ridding them of the ragweed currently plaguing their nostrils. Allergy season is almost over.

Or is it?

While anticipating the relief of winter, those affected by allergies must first face fall. The growing season may have ended with the leaves turning color and hitting the ground, but as beautiful as the scenery is, those dead leaves can be a concern. It's not the leaves people are allergic to, but what hides underneath them.

Fallen leaves are a great source of nutrition for mold and [mold spores](#), according to Timothy Craig, of the division of pulmonary, allergy and [critical care medicine](#) at Penn State Hershey Medical Center. Mold grows in piles of leaves and rotting logs and when the mold is disturbed by wind and other means, the spores are released into the air. Unlike pollen, mold does not die with the first frost. It becomes dormant during the winter months and grows again in the spring.

With the falling leaves also comes gradually cooling temperatures and, for some, less of a desire to be outside. Being inside, however, brings a whole host of other allergy issues.

"When the heat kicks on and the windows are closed, the new enemies are the [indoor allergens](#) such as pet dander, mouse dander, indoor molds

and, especially, house dust mites," Craig said.

When facing an enclosed environment, avoidance is best. Since dodging the enemy is unrealistic for many, actively combating them is the only answer:

- Be aggressive.
- Regularly and properly grooming (or removing) pets will reduce dander.
- Another fix for pet dander, as well as [dust mites](#), is using mattress covers on mattresses and box springs, and protective pillow covers.
- Call a professional when combating mouse and [insect infestations](#).
- If battling molds, keep humidity low. Cleaning minor issues yourself is a fairly easy fix by using diluted bleach, best for killing mold.
- Remember to wash all bed linens including blankets, bedspreads and sheets in hot water every one to two weeks.
- It is best to not have carpets, if possible.
- Clean regularly.

Another thing to think about as the holidays approach is fragrance, usually in candles. The candle itself is not the allergen, but contained within some candles are chemical irritants that can trigger allergy-like symptoms.

According to Craig, it is best to avoid candles since they may release toxic hydrocarbons.

Fireplaces and outdoor fire pits are more appealing and used more frequently in the colder months, but Craig suggests leaving them unlit.

"Burning wood, coal and other combustible items should be avoided for

both allergic and nonallergic people," Craig said. "The fumes are unhealthy and are irritants and can be harmful to health."

For those still experiencing runny nose, congestion and itchy, watering eyes as the seasons change, relief can be as simple as an over-the-counter, non-sedating antihistamine. This is all the majority of allergy sufferers need.

"They are now dirt cheap and very effective, and generics are as good as the name brand," Craig said.

If antihistamines alone don't work, prescription alternatives are available.

For patients looking for a drug-free solution, Craig recommends a simple, inexpensive saltwater rinse of the nasal cavity.

The popular neti pot is one way to flush the sinuses and avoid medication. While effective in removing irritants and other debris, some doctors argue it may be washing out the natural defenses in the nose.

Craig recommends caution when using a neti pot. It is important to use sterile water—store-bought distilled is the most convenient—and to finish the solution and not save it for a second use. He advises patients to use it when symptoms are at their worst, to use it before bed and not to use it too frequently.

Cold air is another means to relieve symptoms. Just as runners are advised to avoid the outdoors during midday in the warmer months when allergens are high, indoor allergy sufferers should get themselves outside as much as they can during the colder months.

Craig says it is important to also keep in mind that exercise in cold, dry air can trigger asthma symptoms.

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

Citation: The Medical Minute: Fall and winter bring allergy woes, too (2012, October 11)
retrieved 18 April 2024 from
<https://medicalxpress.com/news/2012-10-medical-minute-fall-winter-allergy.html>

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