

# Hay fever or virus? For allergy sufferers, a season of worry

March 30 2020, by Michael Rubinkam

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In this March 26, 2020, photo, a person takes in the afternoon sun amongst the cherry blossoms along Kelly Drive in Philadelphia. For millions of seasonal allergy sufferers, the annual onset of watery eyes and scratchy throats is bumping up against the global spread of a new virus that produces its own constellation of respiratory symptoms. That's causing angst for people who suffer from hay fever and are now asking themselves whether their symptoms are related to their allergies or the new coronavirus. (AP Photo/Matt Rourke)

The spring breezes of 2020 are carrying more than just tree pollen. There's a whiff of paranoia in the air.

For millions of seasonal [allergy](#) sufferers, the annual onset of watery eyes and scratchy throats is bumping up against the global spread of a new virus that produces its own constellation of respiratory symptoms. Forecasters are predicting a brutal spring allergy season for swaths of the U.S. at the same time that COVID-19 cases are rising dramatically.

That's causing angst for people who never have had to particularly worry about their [hay fever](#), other than to stock up on antihistamines, decongestants and tissues. Now they're asking: Are these my allergies? Or something more sinister?

"Everyone is sort of analyzing every sneeze and cough right now," said Kathy Przywara, who manages an online community of [allergy sufferers](#) for the Asthma and Allergy Foundation of America.

Never mind the differing symptoms—that sneezing and [runny nose](#), hallmarks of hay fever, are not typically associated with COVID-19, which commonly produces coughing, fever and in more serious cases shortness of breath. Never mind that allergies don't cause fevers. Allergy sufferers fret that there's just enough overlap to make them nervous.

Allergy season is already underway in Oceanside, California, where Ampie Convocar is dealing with a runny nose, sinus pain and headache, and an urge to sneeze. Last year, she would've considered her symptoms mere annoyance. Now they cause tremendous anxiety. People with asthma, like Convocar, are at higher risk of severe illness from COVID-19.

"I consider it as something that could kill me because of COVID-19 floating around," Convocar said via email. With a family member still

traveling to work every day, she said, "I don't know what he got out there."

Many garden-variety hay fever sufferers, of whom there are about 19 million adults in the U.S., are also on heightened alert.

They're taking their temperatures each day, just in case. They're hiding their sneezes and sniffles from suspicious colleagues and grossed-out grocery shoppers. They're commiserating with each other and sharing memes on [social media](#) ("I don't know if I should buy Zyrtec or turn myself in to the CDC").

Pamela Smelser is reminded of allergy season every time she looks out the window of her home office, where her cherry tree is blooming. Spring came early to Maryland, she said, and lots of people are coughing and sneezing from the pollen.

"You do what you have to do: You take your meds for allergies and stay away from people," Smelser said. "People get really hinky about coughing right now."

Though she's had allergies for years, Smelser, a semi-retired social worker and community college teacher outside Baltimore, admits to being a touch paranoid. She takes her temperature every day because she's 66 and, well, you can never be too careful.





In this March 26, 2020, file photo, people exercise on the trail along Kelly Drive in Philadelphia. For millions of seasonal allergy sufferers, the annual onset of watery eyes and scratchy throats is bumping up against the global spread of a new virus that produces its own constellation of respiratory symptoms. That's causing angst for people who suffer from hay fever and are now asking themselves whether their symptoms are related to their allergies or the new coronavirus. (AP Photo/Matt Rourke, File)

"I can't rule out that I have anything," she said. "That's the paranoia: You can't even get a test to say, 'This is all seasonal allergies.'"

In Pennsylvania, pear trees are budding, red maple are beginning to flower and Leslie Haerer's allergies are already in full bloom. The 64-year-old retired nurse, who lives about an hour north of Philadelphia,

is coping with a scratchy throat, an urge to sneeze and a headache behind the eyes.

As a medical professional, Haerer knows her symptoms are attributable to her allergies. She also knows that other people are "really flipped out about this," including the scowling family of three who saw her sneeze into her elbow outside a Chinese restaurant and, instead of continuing on to their destination—the pizza shop next door—got in their car and sped away.

"I was like, 'I'm sorry you missed your pizza,'" Haerer said. "People's reactions are just over the top."

In Austin, Texas, where pollen counts are high, Marty Watson initially dismissed his itchy eyes, mild headache, coughing and sneezing as the product of a tree allergy, even after his temperature became slightly elevated. Then, in mid-March, he realized he could no longer smell a pungent sourdough starter, and friends began sending him news stories that said a loss of smell sometimes accompanied a [coronavirus](#) infection.

"Austin is notorious for all sorts of allergies, and it became really hard to tell: Is it this? Is it that?" said Watson, 52.

For most people, the new coronavirus causes mild or moderate symptoms that clear up in a couple weeks. Older adults and people with existing health problems are at higher risk of more severe illness, including pneumonia and death.

As allergy season ramps up in Pennsylvania, Dr. Laura Fisher, an allergist in Lancaster, expects an influx of worried patients. She is advising them to keep up with their medications, stay at home as much as possible and monitor for symptoms that seem unrelated to their allergies.

"I think people are more afraid of catching it, more afraid of going out and getting it from the grocery store or drive-thru, than they are of their usual symptoms being COVID," said Fisher, president of the Pennsylvania Allergy and Asthma Association.

Jessica Tanniehill initially blew off her symptoms as allergy-related.

Tanniehill, 39, of Adamsville, Alabama, started with a runny nose and sneezing. Body aches and a cough came next, following by shortness of breath. She thought her seasonal allergies had led to a bout of anxiety, nothing more, especially since she'd been outside all day doing yard work and washing her truck. "I didn't take it seriously," she said.

Turns out she'd contracted COVID-19—which doesn't preclude the possibility that she'd had allergies as well.

Tanniehill, who's now on the mend, acknowledged that she "was one of the people that was saying they're overreacting to all this. But now I wish I was more careful."

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