

Expert tips to navigate longer, more severe allergy seasons due to climate change

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In recent years, the telltale symptoms of seasonal allergies—itchy, watery eyes; sneezy, runny nose; and cough and wheezing—start earlier, last longer and may be more severe.

Allergy experts at The Ohio State University Wexner Medical Center attribute these changes to the [warming climate](#) and increased carbon dioxide levels in [urban areas](#) leading to longer pollen seasons and higher pollen counts.

"Allergy seasons have been changing in North America and across the globe, and we see greater changes the further you get from the equator," said Dr. Kara Wada, allergist immunologist at The Ohio State University Wexner Medical Center and clinical assistant professor of [allergy](#) and immunology at The Ohio State University College of Medicine. "In the U.S., the time between our thaw and our freeze is much longer so plants have longer to reproduce and produce more pollen."

Not only do these [environmental changes](#) impact long-time [allergy sufferers](#), but it has also led to a growing number of people being diagnosed with [seasonal allergies](#) for the first time. According to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 19.2 million adults were diagnosed with seasonal allergies in 2018, the most recent data available. Seasonal allergies are the 6th leading cause of chronic illness in the U.S. and affect up to 60 million people.

With the increase in irritants in the air, Wada recommends allergy testing to determine which allergens are causing the symptoms. Once allergy testing is complete, she advises her patients take a three-prong approach to treatment:

- **Avoidance:** Monitor pollen levels and avoid spending time outdoors when pollen counts are high. If you must spend time outdoors, when you return home, change your clothes and bathe to remove pollen from your skin and hair. Keep windows closed in the car and at home. Use high-efficiency filters in your heating and cooling system and change them regularly.
- **Medication:** If possible, begin taking antihistamines

recommended by your doctor a few weeks before spring allergy season begins. Taking medication early can stop the body's histamine response before it starts. Histamine causes the inflammation that leads to itchy eyes, nasal congestion and sneezing. It can be hard to stop the body's histamine response once it starts.

- Immunotherapy: Given over a three-to-five-year period, immunotherapy can desensitize the immune system to the allergen. Small doses of the allergen are given in shots, drops or tablets placed under the tongue to slowly retrain the immune system not to react to it. Once immunotherapy is complete, patients may need little to no allergy medication.

"There are incredibly helpful, really effective treatments that an allergist immunologist can help you figure out the perfect combination to help treat your symptoms and get you feeling better," Wada said. "If allergies go untreated, not only are your symptoms going to worsen with stuffy nose, sneezing, but that also can sometimes progress into sinus infections, and recurrent sinus infections can sometimes require surgery."

Scientists continue to identify new allergens. More than a hundred new allergens have been named in the past three years, including common seasonal insects that invade our homes like the Asian ladybug. This research helps allergy sufferers take action against exactly what's causing their symptoms.

Provided by The Ohio State University

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