



Allergies, a Primer

By Wendy Marks
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AH-CHOO!

Spring is coming, and although I think we are all going to be happy to see the back of winter this year, Spring brings its own challenges. Ah-choo, scratch scratch, rub rub, and drip drip— these are some of the “fun” experiences that also accompany the beauty and relief of seeing budding plants and flowers.

What are allergies? Basically, they are the immune system’s over-reaction to a substance. They are your body saying “Get this stuff away from me!” For example, I’m allergic to several kinds of mold (most people are, by the way), dust mites (ditto), and MSG. Most of the time it’s the degree of exposure that governs the severity of allergic reactions. A little bit of mold probably won’t bother me much— I’d just get a little stuffy— but with enough, my breathing might become labored and I’d feel miserable. When people ask me about mold remediation for their house, I tell them that everyone is allergic to mold if there’s enough of it. That’s most likely a sensitivity. A sensitivity doesn’t come close to the reaction of an allergy, but is bothersome nonetheless.

There are, of course, the more serious allergies like the ones requiring EpiPens or even hospitalization. Those allergies are hard-wired and triggered often by even the smallest exposure. Some examples are penicillin, peanuts, tree nuts and nightshades (e.g. potatoes, tomatoes, peppers, eggplant).

So here we are entering the season commonly associated with mold, pollen, and outdoor allergies and sensitivities. What can we do about this? Well, I think that depends on the degree of problems that you have. Even though you can probably make anyone respond to mold with enough exposure, some people become life-threateningly ill with a very minor exposure. And many of us are sensitive to a lot of things.

Here are a few tips you can use to ease your symptoms:

- I’m a big fan of nasal rinsing. There’s a product available in your local drugstore called NeilMed Sinus Rinse that is a western adaption of the neti pot. It’s a squirt bottle that comes with packets of pre-mixed salt and bicarbonate to which you just add water and use morning and evening. Keep it next to your toothbrush and Voila! It easily rinses out allergens and excess mucus, shrinks nasal tissues and is a mild antiseptic. Perfect.
- Homeopathic seasonal regional allergy preparations. These are formulated for the particular allergens in different areas of the country.
- Taking an anti-inflammatory is a good idea too; often turmeric is just the ticket.
- Investing in an air purifier gives you a “breather” from all sorts of indoor and outdoor allergens.

I'm not averse to over-the-counter Claritin type medications for seasonal temporary use. We need to function, and some of us may require the help to get through the season, whether from mold, trees, grasses, flowers, or weeds.

A word here regarding food sensitivities: if you suffer from environmental allergies, the burden on your immune system becomes greater when you are already a diet-sensitive person. As with exposure to environmental allergens, many of us are actually sensitive to lots of foods, and to varying degrees. Dairy is a good example. Most people are fine with dairy, but if they eat a large amount, like a giant ice cream sundae, they get a tummy ache. It is probably either too much milk fat, milk sugar (lactose) or milk protein (casein) for their system to break down. Sadly, for mine as well...

Unfortunately, a lot of the traditional tests for food and environmental allergies don't really determine whether something is a sensitivity or an allergy. We should deal with those two things in very different ways. More people than I can count have come into my office and said their doctor recommended they avoid certain foods. So they stopped eating those foods. When they re-tested for "allergies" about three months later, they were no longer allergic to the first set of foods, but tested positive to a whole new different set of foods. These are sensitivities, not allergies, and are often caused by eating the same foods for a long period of time.

The simple answer to a lot of food sensitivities is eating a rotational diet— in other words, a diet that varies foods week to week. I know that's hard but it is doable with a little thought. Conscious eating can minimize the overall burden on our immune system as we head into the warm weather and all its challenges.

Getting back to Spring...

Skin allergies are another ball of wax. Many plants give off or rub off substances that cause irritation and inflammation. Simple as this sounds, try not to touch plants. If you are gardening it's a good idea to wear gloves, and if you are going to a nursery to look at different types of plants be very careful about what you touch. Nurseries often put pesticides on their plants and these types of poisonous chemicals can be very irritating. If you find yourself reacting after visiting the nursery, immediately wash your hands, arms or legs with soap and water. Once you are home, use an oil-based soap and wash again. Needless to say, it is important to think carefully about the value of using pesticides at home and in the garden. They can often cause a bad allergic reaction— to both the lungs and the skin.

Given all that, at this point give me Spring. Ah-choo!

Namaste,
Wendy