

Attacking ALLERGIES *in Seniors*

Do allergies have you in agony? Arm yourself against attacks with a little knowledge and some simple steps that can help.

BREEZES HAVE COOLED, and leaves are changing color. But coughs and sneezes are back full throttle, making life a little less comfortable for those who are living with seasonal allergies.

Because other chronic conditions that many seniors manage on a daily basis can seem more serious or urgent, allergies may be considered minor annoyances to be endured. But later in life, seniors may be susceptible to a condition known as oral allergy syndrome (OAS) or pollen-food syndrome, which can be more dangerous than the typical congestion and coughs.

This condition develops as a result of cross-reactivity between pollen and fruits or vegetables to which the pollen is botanically related. When eating certain fresh fruits and vegetables, people with oral allergy syndrome may experience symptoms that can include itching of the mouth, lips or throat, hives (red patches or welts on the skin) swelling of the lips or tongue, nausea, and vomiting.

Allergy shots may help minimize symptoms caused by OAS. Avoiding raw fruits and vegetables may reduce cross-reactions that cause the allergy symptoms to flare. Peeling, microwaving or baking the produce may also reduce the likelihood of allergic reactions.

"Older adults may ignore these symptoms because they have no history of food allergies," says **Cascya Charlot, M.D.**, a specialist in allergy and immunology at New York Methodist Hospital. "They fail to realize that new food allergies may develop later in life and may be easily and effectively managed."

OTHER ALLERGY OFFENDERS

In addition to food allergies, seniors may also have allergic reactions to medications that they are taking, which can be dangerous and, in some cases, fatal.

"Allergies in seniors cover a wide spectrum, negatively impacting quality of life and sometimes even causing life-threatening complications," says **Krishnamurthi Sundaram, M.D.**, attending surgeon and otolaryngologist at NYM. "I frequently encounter older patients who develop angioedema—an allergic reaction causing swelling under the skin—from angiotensin-converting-enzyme inhibitors, which are medications used to treat congestive heart failure and hypertension."

To ensure that seniors stay as healthy and safe as possible when taking these medications, they should be watchful for symptoms like throat closing or tightness and difficulty breathing after taking antihypertensive medications. If any warning signs of an allergic reaction occur, a visit to the emergency room may be necessary.

Of course, seniors are also susceptible to the same seasonal and environmental allergens that can cause miserable symptoms for people of all ages. In the fall, when ragweed makes an appearance, allergy symptoms can include congestion, headache, itchy eyes, runny nose, scratchy throat and sneezing. In the winter, dust, mold and pollen from indoor sources like forced air heaters and indoor plants may cause similar symptoms for seniors who spend the majority of their time inside.

FINDING ANSWERS, TAKING ACTION

While self-diagnosing seemingly mild or moderate allergy symptoms—like itchy, watery eyes and coughing—and treating them with over-the-counter medications may seem as if it's the most convenient option, talking with a doctor first may save time and discomfort. What may seem like an allergy on the surface could turn out to be a different problem.

"Many people attribute respiratory problems to allergies, but this is a dangerous assumption, especially for an elderly person," says **Emil Baccash, M.D.**, attending physician in geriatric and internal medicine at NYM. "For example, an elderly person with watery, itchy eyes could have an undiagnosed ocular disease like glaucoma, and a senior who has started wheezing may have developed congestive heart failure, so talking with a doctor early on is critical."

Doctors take a medical history and perform blood and skin allergy tests to help determine whether allergies are responsible for their patients' discomfort. They may also implement environmental control measures to determine how each individual responds when certain allergens are removed from the equation. Once the allergens have been identified, an allergist may recommend avoiding them, if possible, and/or treatments, which might include:

- + Antihistamines to combat hives, runny noses and watery eyes
- + Decongestant medications to ease nasal congestion and pressure
- + Eye drops containing corticosteroids to treat itchy, red eyes
- + Immunotherapy given through a series of injections or tablets that dissolve under the tongue

Talk with your doctor about all of these treatment options. He or she can prescribe medications that will offer the safest, most effective relief.

"Certain medications can cause seniors to become weak or confused," Dr. Baccash says. "For example, something that seems harmless, like diphenhydramine, an antihistamine found in many popular, over-the-counter allergy and sleep aid medications, may cause memory loss in older adults because it has anticholinergic effects—meaning it can block neurotransmitters and stop or slow nerve impulses in the brain. For older adults, I may recommend the antihistamine loratadine, which can also be found in many over-the-counter medications."

RINSE, REPEAT

In addition to other treatments, some people with allergies regularly use saline rinses to irrigate and flush the nasal passages.

"If you think of your nose as a little vacuum cleaner that sucks up dust in your environment, which then sticks to the lining of your nose, you can clearly visualize what causes allergic reactions," Dr. Baccash says. "Mucus from a runny nose helps flush those allergens, but mucus can be thicker and harder to expel as we get older. By washing out your nose with a saline spray, you may be able to dislodge the allergy-inducing debris."