

LIFE LINES

Summer Allergy Miseries

Mild Winters, Too Little Rain, Global Warming And Hyper-Hygienic Lifestyles Are All Suspects In The Outbreak Of The Worst Allergy Season Ever

By HEATHER J. CHIN
THE BULLETIN

Don't think it's just you. It is not your imagination. Age has nothing to do with it. Things really are worse this year. Everyone is feeling the pressure.

Yes, this is a vintage year, maybe a historic year, for allergy miseries. Many of us are having just a little more trouble breathing. Our sinuses feel as though they are under attack. Coughing and sneezing and scratching incessantly at dry eyes seems to have become a more or less permanent condition.

Although observers described last year as an especially bad allergy season on the East Coast, with a mild winter and late growing season exacerbating already warm weather, 2008 is already providing even more frustrating conditions for allergy sufferers.

Tree pollen, mold and grass pollen were the most common, active pollen types in the Philadelphia area during June, with "very high" levels according to Weather.com's Pollen Almanac, and mold allergens have dominated the scene through the first half of July.

Seasonal allergies are caused by airborne pollens, which are released from trees and grasses during pollination and reproduction. Beginning with the spring pollination of trees and the early summer introduction

of grass particles, allergens trigger the strongest reactions in summer and early fall.

This year, "with the mild winter, the trees have been blooming earlier, and the first cases of allergy exacerbation started in early March," said Corinna Bowser, M.D., an allergist at Adult and Pediatric Asthma and Allergy, in Havertown, whose practice serves patients throughout the region. "The counts have been [especially] high because it hasn't been raining a lot and rain usually clears the air of allergens."

Dr. Bowser said she has observed an increase in reports of first-time allergy suffering by people in their 40s and 50s. Allergic reactions to outdoor allergens usually first present themselves in teenagers and those in their 20s.

The creation of a seemingly new group of allergy sufferers may be the result of more people reporting their allergies, rather than the development of new airborne issues, Dr. Bowser, who is also part of the teaching faculty at the Philadelphia College of Osteopathic Medicine, said. Either way, it can be excruciating for allergy sufferers.

"People who have had allergies for some time, but never bad enough to seek care [may be] finally pushed over the edge [to seek treatment] now that the counts have been higher and the

effect has been worse."

There are other theories and possibilities being considered by asthma, allergy and immunology specialists, including the impact of climate change (warmer temperatures leading to higher pollen counts) and something called the hygiene hypothesis.

"Our super clean environment, perhaps, may actually put more people at added risk for developing allergies down the line," Dr. John Sundy, an allergy specialist at Duke University Medical Center, told a local television station. This risk would come not from too little hand-washing, but from a lack of early exposure to natural environments that include allergy triggers like pollen, dust and animal fur.

American Lung Association statistics indicate residents under age 18 and over age 65 living in the five-county Philadelphia area are at a high risk of developing everything from pediatric asthma to chronic bronchitis and CV disease to diabetes.

Common allergy triggers in Pennsylvania, as listed on Weather.com, include alfalfa, honeysuckle, horse chestnut, poison sumac [leaves], post oak and prairie ragweed.

In addition to the typical plant-related allergens such as pollen and ragweed, atmospheric conditions such as ozone lev-



MARK CROSSE (ABOVE) / The Fresno Bee AND JIM COLE (BELOW) / AP

ABOVE: The sun rises over the Fresno, Calif., skyline amid a haze. High temperatures in the Central Valley has contributed to poor air quality in the area. BELOW: Flowers grow in a field at Nubanusit Neighborhood and farm in Peterborough, N.H. Tree pollen, grass pollen and off-kilter seasons are among the culprits making 2008 a bad year for allergy sufferers.

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Many options exist to aid allergy sufferers, ranging from asking doctors about allergy medications and antihistamines to timing outdoor activities to avoid early morning pollen saturation.

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Know What Allergy Triggers Are In Your Area And Then Avoid Contact With Allergens

Allergy and Asthma Triggers, courtesy of the American Lung Association:

If you or someone you know has allergic symptoms or asthma, you are sensitive to "triggers," including particles carried in the air. These "triggers" can set off a reaction in your lungs and other parts of your body. Triggers can be found indoors or outdoors. They can be simple things like:

- Cold air.
- Tobacco smoke and wood smoke.
- Perfume, paint, hair spray, or

any strong odors or fumes.

- Allergens (particles that cause allergies) such as dust mites, pollen, molds, pollution and animal dander (tiny scales or particles that fall off hair, feathers or skin) and saliva from any pets.
- Common cold, influenza and other respiratory illnesses.

Foods That May Trigger Allergies (courtesy of Children's Hospital of Philadelphia Web site):

- Ragweed — Bananas, melons (watermelon, cantaloupe, hon-

eydew) zucchini, cucumber, dandelions, chamomile tea

- Birch — Apples, pears, peaches, apricots, cherries, plums, nectarines, prunes, kiwi, carrots, celery, potatoes, peppers, fennel, parsley, coriander, parsnips, hazelnuts, almonds, walnuts

• Grass — Peaches, celery, melons, tomatoes, oranges

- Mugwort — Celery, apple, kiwi, peanut, fennel, carrots, parsley, coriander, sunflower, peppers

• Alder — Celery, pears, apples, almonds, cherries, hazelnuts,

peaches, parsley

- Latex — Bananas, avocado, kiwi, chestnut, papaya

Dr. James Thompson, a Chicago-based allergy and asthma specialist, offers these suggestions to avoid allergens:

- Reduce or remove as many asthma and allergy triggers from your home as possible.
- If possible, use air filters and air conditioners — and properly maintain them — to make your home cleaner and more comfortable.
- Pay attention to the problem

of dust mites. Work hard to control this problem in the bedroom.

- Vacuum cleaners with poor filtration and design characteristics release and stir up dust and allergens.

• Do not allow cigarette smoke and wood smoke in the home and/or around anyone with allergies or asthma.

- Keep pets out of the bedroom and give pets frequent baths.

• Keep insects and roaches out of the house by keeping kitchens clean, avoiding clutter and fixing leaks.

• Avoid mold by cleaning basements, using dehumidifiers, washing pillows and linens and keeping houseplants outside.

- Clean and maintain all surface areas and toys to avoid dust.

• Have your car exhaust pipe cleaned and avoid excess gas use.

For a complete list of Pennsylvania-specific allergens, go to <http://www.weather.com/activities/health/allergies/common/index.html?from=breadcrumbs> and click on Pennsylvania.