Dandelion Whine

Helpful hints to get out of hay-fever hell.

September 1, 2000 By Greg Lugliani

Nurse, Read This!

Last spring, the plant kingdom nearly killed me. Yeah, I'm talking hay fever. Short of purging my clogged sinuses with Liquid Plumr, what can I do to avoid a repeat this fall?

—Liberty or Death

Dear Libby:

It's small consolation, dear, but those beautiful blooms of spring reduce as many as 30 percent of Americans to snotty, sneezy, scratchy, itchy, bitchy messes. Autumn, with different plant pollen blowing in the breeze—not to mention leaf mold, another allergy-inciter—can be just as bad. All told, hay-fever victims, Kleenex clutched to runny noses, annually make some eight million doctors' visits that cost $1.1 billion, and fork over another $2.4 million for remedies. A helluva lot of money to spend because of the not-so-steamy sex lives of trees, grasses and weeds, isn't it? Pollen flitting through God's clear-blue-sky air is, after all, the missionary position of the plant kingdom; even bored bystanders of leafy lust can end up riddled with red eyes, inflammation and rhinitis—the glam name for nasal congestion.

The body gives pollen—minute particle though it be—a reception fit for an invading barbarian, firing an array of substances, including histamine, the cause of those unwanted symptoms. Unfortunately, the more pollen you're exposed to, the more likely you'll develop allergies. And those who are prey to pollen are also prone to messy, mucous-filled reactions to animal dander, molds, dust mites (there's no nice way to say this, sweetie: These microscopic buggers live in your bed and feast on human skin cells) and—city dwellers pay heed—cockroaches. (Those sharing Nursie's interest in human evolution will note that allergies probably originated millions of years ago as a way for the body to rid itself of worms and other ickies.)

Hay fever's symptoms are similar to the common cold's, but there are differences: The former involves no actual fever and can persist for weeks or months. And while the unafflicted may have little sympathy, heavy hay fever can sometimes result in sinus and ear infections, asthma and more.

More than half of sufferers rush for over-the-counter relief rather than docs' prescriptions, and pharmacy shelves groan under the weight of the options. Oral antihistamines, which shut off the leaky-faucet nose, are the most popular—including Benadryl, Allegra, Claritin and Comtrex (generic varieties have clorpheniramine or diphenhydramine). These suppress sniffles and sneezes, but can cause drowsiness, dry mouth or blurred vision. (Although there are no known interactions between anti-allergy and anti-HIV drugs, people with heart disease, diabetes and other conditions, as well as tranquilizer-takers, should call doc before popping.) Fast-acting nasal sprays also abound, including the antihistamine Astelin and the

steroid-packing Beconase, Flonase and Nasacort. Sprays' downside: They can sting, take a week of spritzing to stop you from sounding like the Elephant Man and create a "rebound" effect—more snot than you started with.
Still a-drippin'? Perhaps a poke with allergy shots (immunotherapy) will put your nose back in joint. These involve small injections two times a week at first, then less often, for three to five years. One third of those who knuckle to the needle are rid of allergies for good; the rest relapse.

If the miracles of modern chemistry are not to your liking, give hay fever the heave-ho naturally with a combination of quercetin (400 mg, twice daily); vitamin A (25,000 IU daily for one month; if pregnant, no more than 10,000 IU including your multi); vitamin B complex (100 mg, three times daily); vitamin C with bioflavanoids (1,000 mg, three times daily, or higher if tolerable); and zinc lozenges (50–80 mg). Also raid health food stores for stinging nettle and ginger (capsules, tincture or tea). Hello, homeopathy? Try Allium cepa, Arsenicum album or Euphrasia officianalis.

The cheapest anti-allergy approach is, of course, the hardest: Avoid pollen altogether. Stay indoors when the pollen count is high (5 a.m. to 10 a.m. is peak), lawns are mowed, and weather is dry and windy. Keep windows closed and air conditioners on, and sleep with your head elevated. One last tip: A hint of horseradish or a dash of cayenne pepper—with food or straight—will have your nostrils passing the white glove test in seconds! Smell ya later.

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