

Patient Update

Avoid springtime allergens to reduce symptoms of asthma

Spring is here and that means for 40 to 50 million Americans, so are allergies. Allergic diseases, such as allergic asthma, affect more than 20% of the population, and are the sixth leading cause of chronic disease in the United States.

Allergic asthma is characterized by inflammation of the bronchial tubes. The muscles of the bronchial walls tighten and extra mucus is produced, causing the airways to narrow. The result could range from a frequent tendency for cough, to minor and severe difficulty in breathing. In some cases, breathing may be so labored that an asthma attack becomes life threatening.

Allergic asthma is the most common form of asthma. Asthma is considered allergic when symptoms become more intense, perhaps resulting in an asthma attack, when the individual is exposed to allergens to which their immune system is sensitive.

About 60% of asthma attacks are caused by allergens, such as smoke, pollen and animal dander. Other allergens, such as dust mites, mold and cockroaches, can also trigger a reaction.

The symptoms of allergic and non-allergic asthma are the same. They include:

- Coughing
- Wheezing
- Shortness of breath or rapid breathing
- Chest tightness

Managing asthma

Allergens cannot be totally avoided, especially in the spring. Asthma management includes using proper medications to prevent and control asthma symptoms, and to reduce airway inflammation. Therefore, asthma medications are categorized into two general classes, quick-relief and long-term control medications.

The following tips can be used to help reduce attacks caused by allergens:

- Watch for ozone alerts. These alerts will keep you aware of the potential triggers for the day.
- Minimize outdoor activity on days when temperatures are excessively high.
- Take medications as prescribed in the recommended dosage. Do not take more medication to ease severe symptoms without consulting your doctor.
- Use an air conditioner in both your home and car to keep air clean, cool and dry.
- Do not stand directly behind cars that are running. Exhaust fumes could trigger an asthma attack.

The better informed you are about your asthma triggers and management, the less asthma symptoms will interfere with your activities. It is important to avoid your triggers, work with your allergist/immunologist on a management plan and take appropriate medications as prescribed.

Together, you and your allergist/immunologist can work to ensure that asthma does not interfere with your optimal quality of life. To find an allergist/immunologist in your area, visit the AAAAI Web site, www.aaaai.org.

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