

ASK AHSC

ANSWERS TO HEALTH QUESTIONS

From the University of Arizona Health Sciences Center (AHSC) in Tucson

Q What really causes allergies in the Southwest and how can I control them?

A What most of us refer to as "allergies," allergists refer to as allergic rhinitis.

Seasonal allergic rhinitis -- or hay fever -- is a condition caused by allergy to pollen from plants that flower seasonally, usually spring or fall.

The common symptoms are nasal stuffiness; runny nose; sneezing; itching in the nose and throat; itchy, watery red eyes; fatigue and headache.

At least 30 percent of Tucsonans experience some allergy symptoms at some time during the year. Most allergy symptoms are caused by allergic responses to unavoidable pollens.

How can you reduce your allergy symptoms?

- Try to stay indoors with air conditioning.
- Stay indoors, especially on windy days.
- Air purifiers with HEPA filters can help.
- Wear a pollen mask (especially if you're working in the yard).

Unfortunately, if your home has evaporative cooling, pollens are introduced into the air you breathe indoors as well.

Most allergy sufferers do well with over-the-counter medications such as antihistamines. But if your allergy symp-

toms are severe and do not respond to over-the-counter remedies, you should consult an allergist.

You also should consider consulting a physician if your allergies cause recurrent sinus infections, ear infections or conjunctivitis (also known as "pink eye").

If you are taking over-the-counter allergy medications, read the warning labels carefully. Many cause drowsiness and should not be taken if you will be driving.

Drinking alcohol can exacerbate the sedative effect of an antihistamine, so if you are taking them don't drink. (The only exception is Claritin -- or the

generic version, Loratadine -- which does not cause drowsiness.)

Parents should be cautious when giving children over-the-counter antihistamines and read the labels carefully for dosage information. If the child competes in sports or even recreational activities such as bike riding or skateboarding, antihistamines could decrease reaction time and make these activities unsafe.

Teenagers who are driving should not take over-the-counter antihistamines.

For those whose symptoms persist, there are new medicines on the market that a physician can prescribe. One of the best is a nasal steroid -- 90 percent of the patients who use nasal steroids report marked improvement with allergy symptoms.

For more information, visit my website at

www.peds.arizona.edu/allergyimmunology/southwest

—*Michael Schumacher, MD, professor and section chief, Pediatric Allergy/Immunology, University of Arizona Department of Pediatrics, Tucson*

