

Posted on Wed, Apr. 14, 2010

Spring pollen puts up fight; Big allergy season sets in on Myrtle Beach area

By Steve Palisin
For The Sun News

If you think allergy season has packed more of a punch than usual this year, you and your itchy eyes are in good company. Mother Nature has been extra active on the allergen front this spring.

At this time of year, an element of nature too small for detection by the human eye becomes part of the transition from winter to summer. Airborne allergens from trees and plants score a hole-in-one in disrupting people's comfort through symptoms typical of a head cold: watery or itchy eyes, an itchy palate, sneezing, stuffy noses and scratchy throats.



Mark Schecker of Coastal Carolina Allergy & Asthma Associates classifies this spring as a "very, very active allergy season."

"I think I've been seeing people who have the effects from it for about six weeks already," said Schecker, an allergist/immunologist for 20 years.

One of those is Ashelyn Nicoulin, who sought help from Schecker on a recent sunny spring morning. The 9-year-old golfer from Myrtle Beach suffers from asthma and was unable to finish a recent golf match because of her allergies.

Ashelyn's asthma has been especially bothersome lately because of her allergy to pollen, said her mother, Kasey Nicoulin.

Nicoulin said Schecker had given Ashelyn a new inhaler to help cope with the pollen aflutter in the wind.

"He's getting her ready to go back outside for a while," Nicoulin said of her daughter, who also takes an over-the-counter medication for relief from the tree pollen.

Data from the American Academy of Allergy, Asthma & Immunology, based in Milwaukee, show 35 million Americans - 1 in 9 - deal with seasonal allergic rhinitis, better known as hay fever.

Schecker gave one word to describe the best allergy strategy: avoidance.

"That's pretty tough when there is so much pollen right now," he said.

Some routine but significant steps include keeping house and car windows closed as much as possible in favor of air conditioning, which filters out pollens, Schecker said.

He warned that other "hidden exposures" of pollen exist and travel without any invitation.

"When you go inside from outside, you might have it on your clothes and on your hair," Schecker said.

Washing those clothes and maybe even showering promptly might help in cutting down the spread of pollen inside the home, Schecker said.

"If you have pets," he said, "they might have it on their coats."

Over-the-counter medications can help stave off the effects of allergic reactions, but they differ by the person.

"New ones such as Claritin and Zyrtec last longer than the old ones, with less side effects," Schecker said.

Still, for people troubled by such allergies for extended periods of time, Schecker said allergy shots - "what we call vaccines" - with varying combinations of contents and frequencies of administration after tests on the patient, might have longer term value.

"They can be extremely effective, and they can eliminate an allergy altogether," he said.

Jeffrey Coury is an otolaryngologist with Coastal Carolina Ear, Nose and Throat, which is based in Whiteville, N.C., with offices in Sunset Beach and Leland, N.C.

He said in his four years of practice, this has been the most active pollen season, thanks to a burst into spring with one giant, simultaneous tree blooming.

"A lot of the trees have remained dormant because of the cold winter," he said. "Now with this influx of heat, they've been breaking out of it. When it's a gradual warmth, the pollen counts are more sustainable."

Coury said the past weeks have been busy in his practice.

"I can correlate how busy I am with the pollen count," he said, noting an allergy index he checks at Weather.com maxed out several times recently.

Breaking down the types of pollen by season, Coury said it originates in trees for spring, grass for summer, and ragweed for late summer.

He also outlined a ladder of possible remedies:

- Antihistamines - for itchiness in the nose, eyes or mouth.
- Nasal steroids - for nasal congestion and post-nasal drip.
- Nasal saline rinse - for use after returning indoors.
- Allergy testing - to narrow down the problem and direct the therapy to avoidance.

Vaccinations - custom blended to rid an allergy, but with a commitment that might span a few years.



Schecker thought the 2010 allergy season got a little more active a little earlier than usual, but not to an extraordinary degree.

"A lot of people have been suffering for quite a few weeks" he said. "Now we're seeing people who normally don't have these problems start coming in if they even have the slightest inclination toward allergies."

Charlie Puckett left Schecker's office with a new prescription for the antihistamine Allegra and some sample eye drops.

Spending a lot of time outside in his line of work, which includes maintenance at Belin United Methodist Church in Murrells Inlet, Puckett said he never encountered allergies until about 15 years ago, when fishing near his hometown of Gastonia, N.C., close to Charlotte.

"My eyes started itching," he said, "and I could feel that pain going in my eyes while going down the river in my boat."

Puckett said he used a series of over-the-counter medications for several years, but found their use weakened with time.

His medication regimen now starts each February, to carry him into May.

"It's good that it works, because I'm in and out all the time," Puckett said. "You can carry it in with you on your pants leg."

Puckett calls himself among the fortunate with treatment that helps manage his comfort in everyday life, and pointed out that some people have to work at it year round.

He compared allergies to the effects of having the flu, which he said saps the body's energy.

"People who don't have allergies," Puckett said, "they're lucky."