

Ask the pharmacist: Allergy season, it's nothing to sneeze at

Almost 50 million Americans are affected by seasonal allergies,¹ which begin in the spring and can last through the first frost. They're often triggered by pollens, molds and other airborne allergens. According to the American Academy of Allergy, Asthma, and Immunology, Americans spend as much as \$4.5 billion annually on medications and doctor visits to treat their allergies.²

The first step in treatment is to reduce exposure to specific allergens. If that's not possible, managing symptoms through medication is often next. Here are some tips to help control your allergies:

Know your triggers

To avoid an allergen, you need to know what it is. Doctors can determine what you're allergic to by reviewing your personal and medical history or by conducting a physical exam. In some cases, a skin, patch or blood test may be used to confirm suspected allergens.

Create a sneeze-free environment

A few changes at home can help make a difference. Use an air conditioner whenever possible. Vacuum often to rid your home of dust mites, use hypoallergenic products and check pollen counts before going out. If they're high, limit your exposure to the outdoors.

Find the right remedy

Antihistamines reduce symptoms and work best if taken before exposure to allergens. Decongestants should only be used for a short time, since they can worsen the condition. Nasal sprays, known as nasal steroids, are another highly effective option. To get the most out of nasal sprays, use them regularly and be sure to follow your doctor's instructions.

Know the nonprescription options

Doctors may recommend nonprescription medications as first-line treatment options. Those that include diphenhydramine have been an allergy staple for years but can cause drowsiness. Newer nonsedating antihistamines, such as ones containing loratadine or cetirizine, are now available without a prescription. Such medications are usually less expensive than prescription drugs and are now covered under pretax healthcare accounts, such as flexible spending accounts (FSAs) and health savings accounts (HSAs).

Consider generics

Generic drugs are safe and as effective as brand-name medications. They typically cost 30 to 80 percent less than their brand-name counterparts. Popular allergy medications *Allegra*[®] and *Flonase*[®] are now available as generics—fexofenadine and fluticasone nasal spray. What's more, the popular allergy medications *Zyrtec*[®] and *Claritin*[®] are now available over-the-counter and without a prescription.

Discuss these options with your doctor. With the right knowledge and treatments, you can avoid concerns about watery eyes, runny nose and the cost of allergy medications.

¹ Media Kit, Trends in allergic disease, information from the American Academy of Allergy, Asthma and Immunology, available at: http://www.aaaai.org/media/resources/media_kit/trends_in_allergic_disease.stm.

² Allergy Statistics Fact Sheet from the American Academy of Allergy, Asthma and Immunology, available at: http://www.aaaai.org/media/resources/media_kit/allergy_statistics.stm.