

Seasonal allergies

Spring is in the air! The sun feels warmer, the birds chirp louder and we all look forward to spending more time outside with less layers on our bodies. For some those first signs of springtime set off an alarm – allergy season is back.

What are allergies? They are a severe reaction of the immune system to a harmless substance. Substances that trigger such reactions are called allergens. Those allergens can enter our bodies through the mucous membranes of the airways, the eyes, the skin or the digestive tract. Examples of seasonal allergens are pollens, grass and dust (brought up by winds).

Typical symptoms of seasonal allergies are sneezing, itchy and/or watery eyes, runny nose, hives and rashes. Sometimes an allergic reaction can be so strong, that it causes asthma or shock. This type of allergic reaction is called anaphylaxis or anaphylactic shock. It is treated by administering high doses of steroids. We can determine which substances cause allergic reactions by performing blood tests or by collecting the data. Do your eyes get watery and you start sneezing every time you place a bouquet of tulips in your dining room? – odds are, you are allergic to the pollen of tulips. One of the main mechanism of allergy is the histaminic reaction. Histamine is the protein that is responsible for inflammatory response. It is released by the mast cells that were activated by allergy - specific antibodies called IgE. Histamine increases permeability of blood vessels and it results in swelling. It also can contract smooth muscles in the airways causing breathing difficulty in asthma.

How can one treat seasonal allergies?

Over the counter medicine often times reduces the histaminic reaction caused by allergens. It works by blocking the histamine receptors. This can cause drowsiness and lack of energy, but an almost immediate reduction of symptoms can be experienced.

Unfortunately as soon as the medication wears off, you are back to runny nose and itchy eyes. Decongestants are used to ease – yes, nasal congestion. Nasal sprays diminish the blood flow to the mucous membranes in the nasal cavity. Decongestants make the mucous membranes permanently swollen and dry. It is dangerous to use them long-term. It is a common misconception, that over the counter medicine is harmless! There are some anti-allergy pharmaceuticals that need to be prescribed by your MD, like steroids or leukotriene inhibitors. None of above mentioned medication reduces your bodies immune response to an allergen. They simply block your bodies response to allergens for a while. My best advice is first to eliminate allergen/s from your environment. Of course this is tricky, or simply impossible if you have an allergic reaction to the neighbours' apple tree flowers. Second is to regulate the bodies immune over-response. There are a variety of herbs and herbal supplements that help down-regulate an over responsive immune system. Chinese Medicine has another very effective way of relieving allergies – acupuncture. It has modulating effect on immune system, regulates levels of inflammatory mediators

There are numerous double blind studies confirming the effectiveness of acupuncture in treating allergies. It is particularly useful for patients suffering from multiple allergies.