

NATURAL THERAPIES FOR SEASONAL ALLERGIES

By Dr. Deidre Macdonald, ND

Do the buds of spring signal trouble to you? If so, you may be among the 20% of the population who suffer from spring hayfever. Hayfever, known medically as seasonal allergic rhinitis is the most common allergic disorder in Canada. It is characterized by nasal congestion, sneezing, red, itchy eyes, nose or throat, tearing, fatigue and the dark bags under the eyes (known as allergic shiners). For people allergic to pollen, grass, and weeds, spring and summer are a mixed blessing. But allergic rhinitis can occur at any time of the year for people allergic to dust mites, feathers, and animal dander. Mold and fungus allergies typically flare up in the fall when the molds grow rapidly in the cool moist air. Think of mold allergies if you suffer from sinusitis at the time of year when mushrooms are popping up underfoot.

Allergies are a reflection of a disordered immune system perceiving harmless substances as foreign invaders. The symptoms the body produces are its convoluted attempt to protect itself. Parts of the immune system called mast cells and basophils, release histamine, which causes swelling and fluid discharges in the eyes, nose, and throat.

Conventional treatments target the symptoms of the condition and may provide temporary relief. The new class of anti-histamines, while producing far fewer routine side effects can have potential fatal side effects if combined with some other common drugs, including antidepressants and antibiotics. Steroid nasal sprays have local side effects including nasal irritation and bleeding and perforation of the nasal septum. So, what's worse, the disease or the cure?

Many people are turning to natural medicines to help combat allergies. Extensive scientific research has helped us understand which herbal remedies and natural substances are most beneficial with the least side effects. Nature provides a medicine for spring hayfever in the form of stinging nettles. Ironically, the same plant that can cause a stinging rash if touched, can be transformed into an effective anti-histamine. Studies show that 60% of people find freeze dried nettles to be effective in relieving their symptoms, and 50% find it to be equally or more

effective than the conventional drug counterparts. Nettles not only rarely have side effects, they have many side benefits. They are one of the most nutritious, edible plants in our BC forest. Just make sure you steam them or dry them before eating!

Several other natural remedies have been proven to be effective against allergies. Bromelain is an anti-inflammatory and mucous clearing agent. Quercetin has anti-histamine, anti-inflammatory and antioxidant properties. N-acetylcysteine is an amino acid that breaks down mucous, so it can be discharged more easily. Vitamin C is also helpful for allergies in a number of ways.

Naturopathic physicians are primary care physicians who often pay extra attention to diagnosing and treating allergic conditions. But they not only treat the allergy symptoms, with medicines such as those addressed above, they also help their patients to understand what may be the underlying cause of the allergies. What has caused the immune system to become so disordered that it mounts such a defense to such harmless invaders? What other stresses are impacting the immune system? What can be done to strengthen the immune system in the long run, to prevent or cure allergies? These are the deeper questions one must ask if one wants to get off the endless cycle of symptoms and short-term treatments.

Naturopathic physicians individualize an allergy treatment program for each patient. They educate their patients on how to use diet, herbs, vitamins and homeopathy in a safe and effective manner.

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