

# Allergies and Sinusitis

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Allergy and Immunology

Spring, summer and fall are all enjoyable seasons outdoors in Wisconsin. The lush grass, trees and flowers present spectacular colors through autumn. However, one ailment can ruin these seasons for nearly 22.4 million people – allergies. Around 10 percent of all Americans suffer from seasonal allergies. They affect the nose, eyes, mouth and even people’s daily functions. Allergies rank as the third most common reason children miss school.

Seasonal allergies stem from two natural sources: spores and pollen. These microscopic particles are discharged from plants during the reproductive process. Spores are ejected by mold plants, while pollen is spread by the stamens in trees and flowering plants. As these particles float through the air to complete their reproductive cycle, they also find their way into the human body. The upper Midwest region of the North American continent is the largest pollen belt in the world.

Allergy sufferers have immune systems which generate allergic antibodies to airborne spores, pollens and animal danders which enter the body through eyes, nose and mouth. When a person inhales spores and pollens to which he or she is allergic, it triggers an allergic “attack.” Symptoms of seasonal allergies include bouts of sneezing; itchy, watery, bloodshot eyes; and a very runny and/or stuffy nose.

Even the palate can produce symptoms. Many people with allergies report an itching sensation on the roof of their mouths or deep in their ears or throat. No matter what the side effects, all allergy sufferers agree on one thing – they feel miserable. People who only experience allergies during one time of the year have what’s called seasonal allergic rhinitis, commonly referred to as hay fever. This is a general term people use for their allergies no matter what time of year it is – spring, summer or fall.

Allergies occur seasonally based upon the time of year certain plants begin to reproduce. In the spring, most of the pollen in the air comes from various trees. A number of pollinating grasses contribute heavily to late spring and summer



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allergies. Late summer and fall are notorious for ragweed pollen, but spores also play a big part in allergies. One allergy-related mold called *Alternaria*, grows on decaying vegetation during the summer and then releases its spores around mid-August.

## Treatments

It’s not very easy to determine which plants a person is allergic to based solely on symptoms. However, a qualified

allergist can conduct a skin test to determine which plants a person is allergic to. With this information, a doctor will know better what medications to prescribe.

Although severe allergies are best treated with prescription drugs, over-the-counter medications can be taken to treat mild allergies. Antihistamines will eliminate post-nasal drip, while decongestants are better for heavy stuffiness. Some of the newer antihistamines avoid the sedative side effects typical of older, over-the-counter antihistamines. Some topical nasal medications, including steroid sprays available by prescription, are useful for many people, but may cause unpleasant side effects. Of course, side effects can be just as bothersome as the allergy symptoms being treated. For example, some antihistamines cause drowsiness. Other drugs, like decongestants, can make people jittery and restless. Always read labels, instructions and warnings before taking medications.

In many cases, however, allergy sufferers have multiple allergies which span two or more seasons. If symptoms are severe and/or if medications are not tolerated or are ineffective, allergy shots may be recommended as an alternative or additional treatment. Allergy immunotherapy is particularly useful in cases where patients have not only seasonal allergies, but have allergies to perennial inhalants such as to dust mites or to their own pet(s). These shots are designed to promote tolerance to allergenic proteins so that symptoms diminish or disappear altogether. While these shots are extremely effective, they require a commitment of both time and money . . . especially time.

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# Allergies and Sinusitis continued...

## Allergy shots are given in three phases:

- Phase 1 - one shot once a week for six to eight months until a maintenance dose is reached
- Phase 2 - one shot every other week for eight months to a year
- Phase 3 - one shot once a month for another four to six years

While this schedule sounds extremely long and exhausting, many people swear by its success. The shots may continue for years, but their impact is often felt immediately. Patients quickly notice improvements in nasal congestion and have less itching in the eyes and nose. Allergic reactions don't completely go away at first, but patients see definite improvements over the long-run.

## Sinusitis

Sinusitis is defined as an infection of the nasal sinuses, the hollow cavities found behind the nose in the upper cheek bone. Symptoms for sinusitis are variable, but frequently include a plugged nose, fever, fatigue, coughing, thick nasal drainage, congestion, headaches and even toothaches. Sinusitis is a complication of heavy congestion associated with upper respiratory infections or the common cold. Mucus doesn't properly drain, allowing infectious bacteria to linger and grow within the sinuses. Sinusitis is best treated with antibiotics.

Since congestion causes sinusitis, there appears to be a correlation between this affliction and allergies. With a limited mucus flow, bacteria are more likely to reside and grow in the sinuses during the allergy season.

For this reason, allergy sufferers must be carefully diagnosed by an allergist. Sometimes patients get sinusitis as a complication of their allergies and must receive prescription drugs for both. In other cases, patients try to diagnose their own illnesses, but do so inaccurately. With symptoms being so similar, sinusitis can be mistaken for allergies and allergies for sinusitis.

There are two key signs which help distinguish between allergies and sinusitis: duration and mucus color. While sinusitis has been known to

last for months and sometimes years when not properly treated, it usually only lasts for a couple weeks at most. Allergies, on the other hand, last for long periods of time and show immediate symptoms if medication is stopped.

Mucus color usually differs, too. Mucus associated with allergies is typically clear and runny. Drainage from sinusitis tends to be either yellow or green. If you think you suffer from sinusitis or allergies, it is best to see an allergist. Allergists are knowledgeable about both types of upper respiratory problems and can make an accurate diagnosis.

Breathing comes naturally for all of us. While most of us take it for granted, allergy sufferers and sinusitis patients sometimes go for months without breathing through their noses. They can lose their sense of taste and even have trouble seeing if their eyes are swollen and teary. While most simply accept their condition, there is hope. Medications can relieve their symptoms and special shots can make sufferers immune to allergies. For more information on treatments discussed in this article, contact your allergist or local medical clinic.

For more information call Advanced HealthLine at (262) 512-2880 or toll-free at 1-888-709-2080 outside the Milwaukee metro area, or log on at [www.ah.com](http://www.ah.com).

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