

Spring has sprung, along with the pollen.....

People with asthma have airways that are more sensitive than someone who does not. Because of this, their airways get irritated more easily. For people with asthma, chemicals, odors, animal dander, smoke, and physical activity can irritate their lungs. These substances are called triggers because they cause, or trigger, changes in the airways. People with asthma may react to triggers which may bring on an asthma episode, make asthma symptoms worse, or keep them from getting better.

Allergens can trigger an allergic reaction and irritate the lining of the airways. The most common allergens include pollen from grass, weeds, and trees; mold; dust and dust mites; cockroaches; animal droppings; and dander from animals with fur or feathers.

Each spring, summer, and fall, tiny particles are released from trees, weeds, and grasses. These particles, known as pollen, hitch rides on currents of air. Although their mission is to fertilize parts of other plants, many never reach their targets. Instead, they enter human noses and throats, triggering a type of seasonal allergy, which in turn, can trigger their asthma.

So, what is pollen anyway?

Plants produce microscopic round or oval pollen grains to reproduce. In some species, the plant uses the pollen from its' own flowers to fertilize itself. Other types must be cross-pollinated; that is in order for fertilization to take place and seeds to form, pollen must be transferred from the flower of one plant to that of another plant of the same species. Insects do this job for certain flowering plants, while other plants rely on wind transport.

The types of pollen that most commonly cause allergic reactions are produced by the plain-looking plants (trees, grasses, and weeds) that do not have showy flowers. These plants manufacture small, light, dry pollen granules that are custom-made for wind transport.

An estimated 40-50 million people suffer from allergies, according to the National Institutes of Allergies and Infectious Diseases. There is a close connection between asthma and allergies, so it is important to keep allergens under control to help minimize any asthma symptoms. Because some allergies affect the upper airway, they can trigger an asthma episode in the lower airway. “The good news is that people with allergies have plenty of treatment options available to them”, said (*Insert name of asthma coalition member*) of the (*Inset name of regional asthma coalition*). Many people with asthma will also take allergy medications. Note that not all asthma is allergy-related, and not all allergies will cause an asthma episode. Identifying and minimizing exposure to known allergens can improve quality of life.

According to “The National Asthma Education and Prevention Program (NAEPP): Expert Panel Report 3, Guidelines for the Diagnosis and Management of Asthma—Full Report 2007”, the “first and most important step in controlling allergen-induced asthma is to reduce exposure to relevant indoor and outdoor allergens.”¹

So, what are some things I can do to reduce my exposure to allergens and keep my asthma under control?

Preventive strategies include:

- ?? Avoid the outdoors between 5-10 A.M. when pollen levels are at their highest levels. Save outside activities for late afternoon or after a heavy rain, when pollen levels are lower.
- ?? Keep windows in your home and car closed to lower exposure to pollen. To keep cool, use air conditioners and avoid using window and attic fans.
- ?? Be aware that pollen can be transported indoors on people and pets.
- ?? Dry your clothes in an automatic dryer rather than hanging them outside. Otherwise, pollen can collect on clothing and be carried indoors.
- ?? During high pollen seasons, take a shower and wash your hair before bed time. This will help get pollen off your bed and keep it out of your bed at night.

For more information on asthma, or other lung disease questions, please contact the Minnesota Asthma Coalition at 651-227-8014, or the American Lung Association's Lung Helpline at: 1-800-LUNG-USA, or 1-800-586-4872.

References:

1. National Asthma Education and Prevention Program: Expert panel report III: Guidelines for the diagnosis and management of asthma. Bethesda, MD: National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute, 2007.