



Real relief from **RAGWEED**

Treating your hay fever allergies more effectively right now

MAN: © VISION / AGE FOTOSTOCK

By Chrystle Fiedler

SUMMER IS OVER, and fall is around the corner, but you're still sneezing. Shouldn't your allergies be over by now? Not if you have hay fever, or seasonal allergic rhinitis.

The truth is that while trees are usually done pollinating by late spring, grains of pollen from plants belonging to the genus *Ambrosia*, or what is known as ragweed, are at peak levels right now, making you miserable. Up to 30 percent of Americans suffer from hay fever or allergic rhinitis, resulting in symptoms such as sneezing; coughing; stuffy or runny nose; watery eyes; itchy ears, eyes and/or throat; and dark circles under the eyes.

Why is ragweed such a problem?

"Ragweed is the major fall pollen allergen," says Dr. Martha White, the research director at the Institute for Asthma & Allergy in Wheaton, Maryland, and a practicing allergist from the American College of Allergy, Asthma & Immunology. "That's because ragweed pollinates for six weeks, while the other weeds only pollinate for a week or two."

NEED MORE INFO?

Asthma and Allergy Foundation of America: www.aafa.org

American Academy of Allergy, Asthma & Immunology: www.aaaai.org

American College of Allergy, Asthma & Immunology: www.acaai.org

Hotter temperatures and pollution make ragweed season even more intolerable. The higher the pollen counts where you live, the worse you'll feel (see "Checking the local pollen count"). "Ragweed allergy really affects quality of life," says Dr. Thomas Casale, the executive vice president of the American Academy of Allergy, Asthma & Immunology.

"It decreases work and school productivity and increases absenteeism."

One of the biggest reasons is because symptoms like congestion keep you awake. "You wake up feeling tired and irritable and aren't able to concentrate as well," says Casale, who is a professor of medicine at the University of South Florida, and a Costco member.

How ragweed allergy develops

If you are already allergic to mold, dust or animals, you're more likely to have a ragweed allergy. Ragweed allergy runs in the family, so if your parents or siblings are allergic to plant pollen, chances are you will be too.

When ragweed pollen enters the body, the immune system reacts to it as a threat and immune cells make antibodies. The next time you're exposed, these same antibodies trigger mast cells all over the body to release histamines that cause allergy symptoms.

Seeing your M.D.

The good news is that there are plenty of options for treating hay fever. "You don't have to accept a life with a miserable nose," says White. "There's actually something you can do about it."

Start by seeing your doctor, who will review your medical history, ask questions about your symptoms and allergens, and decide on a treatment plan. If you do have allergies, your doctor can prescribe medication and nasal sprays, including the following, to help relieve your symptoms.

Antihistamines. These help to block symptoms. Both prescription and over-the-counter (OTC) antihistamines (such as Claritin and Zyrtec) are available.

Nasal corticosteroid nasal sprays. The U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA)

just approved Nasacort for OTC use. Used daily, it helps to stop the allergic reaction. Use after nasal washing with a neti pot (a small nasal pot) and a saline mixture.

Nasal crom nasal spray. Available OTC, it helps prevent symptoms. Use before exposure.

Decongestants. Available in nasal drops, spray or pill form, these clear congestion. Side effects may include excitability and insomnia.

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Checking the local POLLEN COUNT

THE POLLEN COUNT is the number of grains of pollen in the air over a 24-hour time period. Ragweed pollen is usually highest between 10 a.m. and 3 p.m., depending upon the weather. To check the ragweed pollen counts in your area:

■ Visit the American Academy of Allergy, Asthma & Immunology (AAAAI) website's national allergy bureau for accurate pollen counts in your area: www.aaaai.org/global/nab-pollen-counts.aspx.

■ Visit pollen.aaaai.org on your iPhone, iPad, BlackBerry or Android to download the AAAAI pollen-count app on your home screen.

■ Check the weather section of your local newspaper.

■ Go to a weather information website and enter your ZIP code. **C**



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Ragwitek. Approved by the FDA in April for allergic rhinitis, this remedy is taken under the tongue (sublingually) and is an alternative to allergy shots. Treatment needs to be started 12 weeks before allergy season and continued throughout.

When it's time for allergy shots

If you still aren't feeling well, you may want to see an allergist for blood and skin testing, which involves having a small amount of the allergen pricked into the skin. If a red bump appears, you're allergic to that substance.

Your allergist can treat you with allergy shots, which contain a tiny amount of the allergen. "Allergy shots gradually change the immune system so you stop being allergic," says White, who is a Costco member. "It's the closest thing we have to a cure." 📱

Author *Chrystle Fiedler* (www.chrystle-fiedler.com) specializes in writing about health issues.

The Costco Connection

Costco members will find a variety of over-the-counter allergy medications at Costco and on Costco.com. Costco pharmacies can fill most prescriptions.

Lower your EXPOSURE

THE AMERICAN ACADEMY of Allergy, Asthma & Immunology offers these tips to help you reduce your exposure to pollen.

- Keep your windows closed and turn on the air conditioning, which cleans the air.
- Stay indoors when pollen counts are high.
- If your symptoms are severe, wear a pollen mask if long periods of exposure are unavoidable.
- When you come inside, take a shower, shampoo your hair and change clothes, right away.
- Let someone else mow the lawn or rake the leaves, which stirs up pollen and molds.
- Avoid hanging sheets or clothes outside to dry; use the dryer instead.
- When traveling by car, keep your windows closed, and use the air conditioning instead.
- Take any medications as prescribed.—CF

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