

BURNING QUESTION

Do Seasonal Allergies Make You More Likely to Get Sick?

An allergist explains how those with allergies can take steps to avoid summer colds

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Many with allergies are polysensitized, or allergic to more than one allergen, which can complicate treatment. PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES

Everything seems to be in bloom this June in many parts of the country. That can be nice for outdoors enthusiasts, but not so much for those who suffer from allergies. Along with itchy eyes and a runny nose, people with allergies often complain they catch every cold going around.

One expert, Neil Kao, a fellow of the American Academy of Allergy, Asthma and Immunology, explains when white blood cells get overexcited and how a shower can be an allergy-sufferer's best defense against the summer cold.

On the Hunt

The immune system works to distinguish normally functioning cells from sickly ones or external agents such as bacteria or viruses that cause disease. It does that by sending out white blood cells to "sample" the receptors on foreign-seeming cells.

"It's sort of like touching your own hair and saying, 'Oh, right, that's me, move along,'" the Greenville, S.C., allergy specialist says.

Another big role the immune system plays is to destroy the cells that are foreign, damaged or cancerous. Pollen, dander, dust and mold comprise part of the normal universe. They should be sampled, deemed neutral, then left alone, Dr. Kao explains. But if you suffer from seasonal allergies, your immune system overreacts.

"Your body thinks the allergens are the front-line, and they attack," Dr. Kao says. "It's bad. It can feel like you didn't get a good night's sleep every day, all season." If you don't have seasonal allergies, he adds, "you can't appreciate how bad it feels."

Most people with allergies are polysensitized, or allergic to more than one allergen, making treatment complex. No one is certain why some people have

allergies and others don't, Dr. Kao says. The common theory is that the predisposition is genetic, though "we don't know what switches it on," he says.

Sick, Sick, Then Sick Again

Mucus is meant to prevent foreign agents from entering the body. But when you have allergies, "your nose is stopped up and your sinuses don't drain—making the mucus a petri dish of germs," says Dr. Kao, who blogs regularly about allergies.

It might seem possible that since the immune system is overreacting to external agents, it would be primed to fight off other infections. But the opposite is true. When an allergic person is confronted by his allergen, his immune system places a priority on the allergens over bad actors like illness-causing bacteria or viruses, allowing them to invade and multiply. "It's really unfair: You feel sick all the time anyway, and then you get hit with colds all season," he says.

Researchers are trying to put the body's allergic reaction to good use. Instead of fighting allergens, immunotherapy scientists are working to get the overreactive function of the immune system to fight cancer cells. "If you could get the allergy arm to work hard to reject the cancer, that would be awesome," Dr. Kao says.

Confronting the Real Enemy

Being extra susceptible to infection makes it all the more important to control allergies, Dr. Kao says. By dampening the overreactive response, the immune system can focus on bacteria and viruses, he says. For people with debilitating allergies, allergy immunotherapy—which is typically a series of shots—may be a great option.

Avoiding the annoying allergen can keep allergic response to a minimum and help ward off other infections. "Stay indoors more if you are allergic to pollen," Dr. Kao says. He also suggests wearing an N95 face mask before mowing the lawn if you're sensitive to grass.

And to prevent back-to-back illnesses, keep your nose clean. Saline solutions, nasal bulbs or Neti pots do the job well, but washing your nose when you wash your body also works just fine, Dr. Kao says. While in the shower, lean forward and rinse out the nose with some warm water and a hefty blow. Then you don't have to worry about mucus buildup carrying bad germs into your body and making you ill.

"Taking a shower is private time. Don't be shy," Dr. Kao says. "Clean your nose. It's dirty."