

Weird pollen

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That yellow haze on your car is the sign of the allergy season. Millions of airborne particles of pollen and mold are entering your lungs right now as you read this. What are they doing in there?

They are trying to find the female side of the plant and fertilize it, but they won't. Instead they will try to fertilize your mucus membranes. Not only is this weird, but their misdirected mating can cause all kinds of problems.

Even in this D.H. Lawrence-like-pollen saga, everything should work out, because the ciliated

cells in you lungs and nose will sweep the pollen up to your throat where you can daintily hack it back out, "ptooey." Sometimes things don't go according to plan.

Sometimes, a kind of white blood cell called the "mast cell", looks at the weird pollen lying on your mucus membranes, and becomes upset. Maybe the mast cell feels that this sort of behavior is un-American, maybe it just can't help itself...I don't know, but the mast cell reacts as though the pollen is a virus or bacteria. Big mistake, but it's too late and the whole immune system begins to attack the deviant pollen. You will have to deal with the after math of this battle. If it happens in the lungs, then it is asthma and it will result in coughing, wheezing, shortness of breath and phlegm.

While phlegm part of it is fun, there are other short and long term consequences. You may become dangerously short of breath and after years of asthma, lung damage may result and lead to COPD or emphysema.

The same kind of reaction can happen anywhere the pollen lands and mates with other mucus membranes such as in the eyes, nose, sinuses, and throat. As a whole, these are called seasonal allergies, but the process is very similar to that in the lungs.

Given that all of this is a result of an immune system mistake, what can we do to avert it?

It is very difficult to avoid allergens. After all these perverse little particles are microscopic and float about through the air everywhere. You could live in a bubble, or stay indoors with the air filter on high, but not forever. You could wear a mask, but then you couldn't travel to France. Other than avoidance, there are medications to blunt your overly excited and annoying immune system.

On the low tech end is the wonderful neti pot which takes advantage of the fact that your nose has two holes. You pour fluid in one side and it comes out the other. It is not too difficult or unpleasant to do and works well to wash allergens out of your nose. Sometimes the fluid can run down your nose and out your mouth. If you find it running out of your ear you should see a doctor soon.

There are all kinds of medicines for allergies, including antihistamines, steroid nasal sprays, and leukotriene inhibitors. These are generally very safe and pretty effective. Reeducating your immune system with allergy shots is another option. Exposing the immune system to tiny doses of the allergen teaches it to ignore it. It does work, but it is high on the end of the effort scale.

Allergies can be some of the most uncomfortable and disabling conditions. They can have serious consequences both immediate and long term. If you feel like you need to tape a bag over your head, stop, don't do it. Come see us for help and let us tape it on. We're professionals.