

SPRING SNEEZING

Bless you, gesundheit, salud: It's allergy season!

As weather warms, allergists predict robust season

By Sandeep Ravindran

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Spring is in the air, and for many people that means sneezing, itchy eyes and runny noses. This year's allergy season has been slow to start, but with the weather warming up, Bay Area residents can expect to stock up on Kleenex through April and May.

And, yikes, allergists warn, maybe even into June.

"Mother Nature came in this year with the rain and cooled temperatures down, so pollen counts haven't been that high yet," said Alan Heller, an allergist in San Jose. "Once it's warmer, drier, and a little more windy, we expect a robust allergy season."

As the weather has warmed up over the past couple of

See **ALLERGIES**, Page 12



WHAT YOU CAN DO

Minimize exposure to pollen from trees, grass and weeds, particularly on dry, windy days.

Keep car windows closed, wear sunglasses.

Prepare for flare-ups in May and June, when grass pollen counts rise.

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Allergies

Continued from Page 1

weeks, Heller already is seeing an increase in allergy patients. He expects a busy April, with the allergy season peaking in May. That's when the air is full of pollen from both trees and grasses.

Epi Ceja, a San Jose resident, said he's already suffering, even though he usually doesn't get allergies until May. "It's been a crazy year; I've never had allergies before at this time," he said.

Seasonal allergies, usually called "hay fever," often occur in spring. But they can appear throughout the year. They occur when the body's immune system overreacts to an irritant, such as pollen, and releases chemicals that produce an allergic reaction.

Prevalence increasing

According to the American Academy of Allergy, Asthma and Immunology, about 60 million people in the United States suffer from seasonal allergies, and their prevalence is increasing. From 2000 to 2005, the cost of treating these allergies almost doubled from about \$6 billion dollars to more than \$11 billion, more than half of which was spent on prescription medicines.

Aimee Frizell, who has lived in San Jose all her life, said the dry weather here makes her runny nose and sneezing worse. Her allergies initially were seasonal, but now she suffers the whole year, she said.

The main causes of allergies change from month to month, said Anjuli Mehrotra, an allergist with the South Bay Allergy and Asthma Group. The tree allergy season starts in January or February, first with cedar and juniper, then pine, and currently oak and mulberry, she said.

"Tree pollen counts are really high in the South Bay. And we should soon see grass pollen in April and early May," Mehrotra said.

And while most people are waiting for warmer weather, if you're allergic to tree pollen, it may be time to do a rain dance.

"If it were to begin raining again, that would be the best allergy medication," said James Wolfe, a clinical professor at Stanford University.

But even that relief would be temporary. "In May and June, this valley has the highest grass pollen counts in the world," Wolfe said. "It's dreadful."

Season lasting longer

People with seasonal allergies should try to minimize their exposure to pollen from trees, grass and weeds, Mehrotra said.

"Wear sunglasses, keep your car windows closed, and limit your outside exposure, particularly on dry, windy days when there's a high pollen count," Mehrotra said.

Local pollen counts are available at the American Academy of Allergy, Asthma and Immunology's website: <http://pollen.aaaai.org/nab/index.cfm?p=pollen>.

"One concern is that allergy season is starting to extend longer, probably because of global warming," Mehrotra said. A recent study found that milder winters and warmer weather have been increasing the length of ragweed pollen seasons in North America since 1995.

Heller suggested that patients prepare themselves for a sudden flare in allergies once both tree and grass pollen counts rise.

"Pollen counts get so high that everyone's going to have problems at the same time," he said.

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