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OCULAR ALLERGY

Watery, red, itchy eyes? Want to rub them, bad, but you know it will just get worse? You could have ocular allergy, a relatively common problem especially in the beautiful spring.

Ocular allergy happens when various allergen particles touch the sensitive mucus membranes lining the front of the eye. These membranes have a number of receptors, which sense the allergens, then start a process of swelling, bloating, and getting red (injection). The presence of the allergens starts a cascade of chemical reactions which culminate in the release of histamines, substances which promote the uncomfortable allergic response.

Ocular allergies can occur from seasonal causes, such as mold spores or grass or tree pollens; or from perennial causes such as dust mites, animal dander, fragrances or pollution.

What can be done to treat this condition? First, avoidance. Try to identify what you are sensitive to and stay away. I discovered that I had trouble with Cottonwood when I noticed that driving on Grandview Avenue gave me an allergy response. If pets are giving you allergic symptoms see that they do not sleep too close to you. Pillows might harbor dust mites and might do well with an encasing sheath. Bedding might do similarly and might respond to a good hot water wash. Carpets and drapes might harbor dust mites and you could consider switching to a hard floor (cleaned with a wet mop to reduce dust) and blinds for window covering. Fragrances might challenge you, and molds do thrive in humid environments. You might consider additional ventilation and/or a dehumidifier if this happens to be the case. When in your car, setting your air conditioner to recirculate will reduce the incursion of outside, possible allergen bearing air.

Next, we should discuss specific treatment for ocular allergy. Each and every time I see a patient who is having these troubles I recommend cold compresses. When I say cold, I mean COLD—such as a gel pack from the freezer, wrapped once in a thin towel and applied to the eyelids for several minutes. This act alone can stop or significantly slow even major outbreaks of allergic response. Another helpful product is the artificial tear, which can help to wash the eye surface of allergens. In the use of all eyedrops, do be aware that most drops contain preservatives. These preservatives can produce an allergic response of their own. I recommend better artificial tears such as the Refresh line, Systane, and Blink Tears. All of these, and other similar “upscale” artificial tears have advanced technology in their preservatives. These make the products less likely to produce allergic responses. Another option is Refresh Plus, which comes in a nonpreserved mini pack to be opened and used within a day.

Beyond that, anti-allergy eyedrops and pills are available. If we are talking eyedrops, I prefer combinations such as Alaway or Zaditor, two over the counter products, which work similarly to high cost prescription products such as Pataday. For milder cases which need only temporary treatment, decongestants such as Opcon A or even Visine are OK, but do bear in mind that decongestants can produce “rebound” trouble which makes eye redness reappear more quickly and can get you “hooked” on the drops. Those who prefer a more holistic approach might like Similisan Allergy. These drops contain a minute amount of allergen and help build immunity. But remember that this sort of drop requires consistent use, even when you are not having much trouble.

Actually, an important principle of allergy treatment is consistency. With few exceptions, anti allergy drops have relatively little “knockdown” or ability to sooth a serious outbreak. Rather, they are designed to reduce the prospect of a cascade of reactions leading to an out of control condition. But once the ‘horse is out of the corral’ so to speak these kinds of drops are hard pressed to provide control.

A final class of eyedrops are the steroids; or the non steroidal antiinflammatories (called an NSAID's). These are more effective at bringing a more serious outbreak under control. Steroids include fluorometholone (FML) , prednisone, or lotoprednol. The latter is a brand product, not a generic. (It has advantages over the generics—less chance of a side effect. However, insurance can object to its use unless it is absolutely necessary) Nonsteroidals include ketorolac drops. However, all of these products have side effects, which must be considered.

Finally, you could consider pills. Such products as Claritin and Zyrtek might reduce ocular allergy, along with other problems such as itchy palate, blocked nasal passages and other manifestations of this pesky, yet harmless condition.