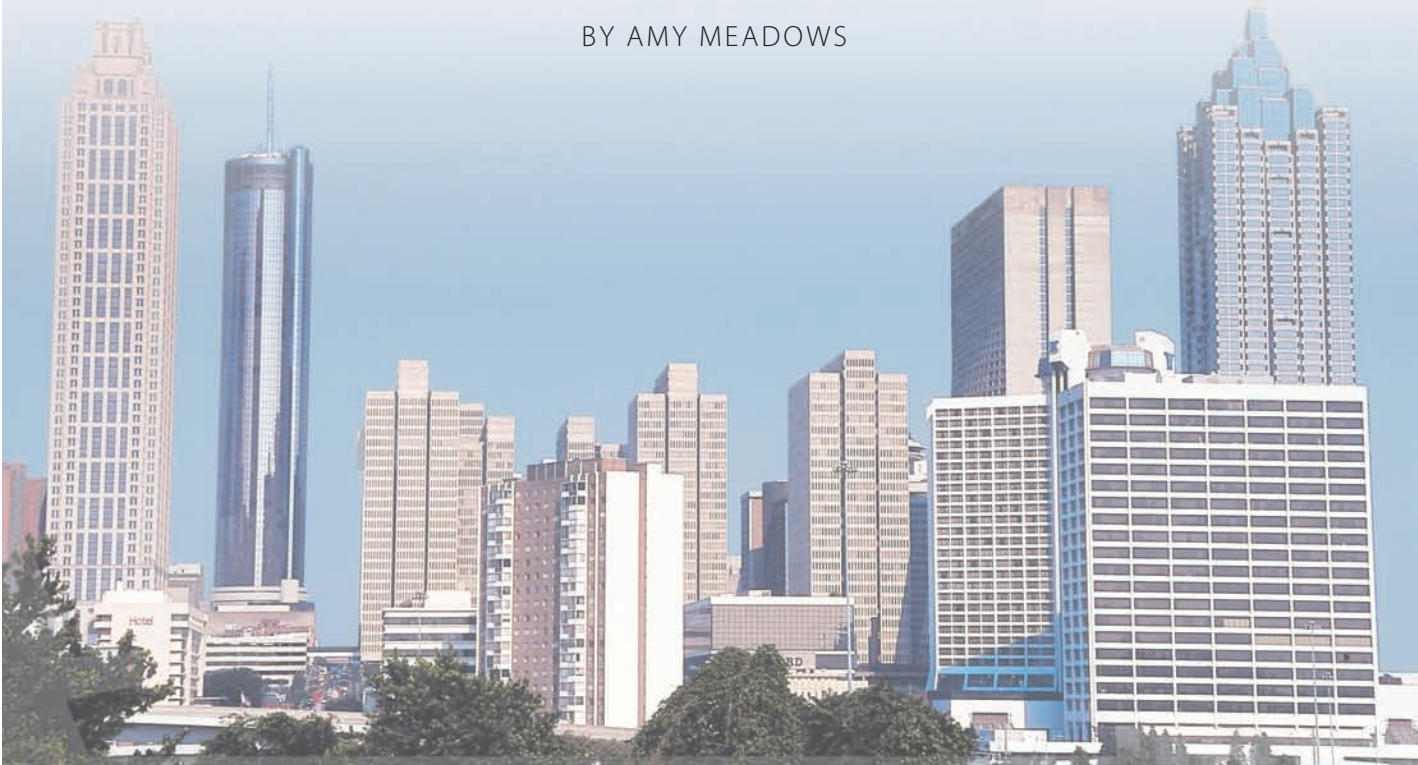


GESUNDHEIT!

What To Do When Allergies Attack Atlanta

BY AMY MEADOWS



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BROOKE SCHMIDT'S STORY IS AN ALL TOO FAMILIAR ONE HERE IN THE METRO ATLANTA area. She's suffered from "classic hay fever" for as long as she can remember, struggling with a combination of itchy, red, watery eyes and severe nasal congestion annually as frosty winter days give way to warm spring ones. "You don't realize how nice it is to breathe until you can't," she quipped. Her symptoms are so bothersome that she doesn't wear contacts or mascara and almost never opens the windows in her home, especially during those few weeks every spring when a blanket of yellow pollen covers everything from mailboxes and cars to sidewalks and streets. Through the years, she has taken over-the-counter (OTC) and prescription medications to alleviate her allergy symptoms after she and her family moved to Georgia.

The abrupt onset of Schmidt's allergic rhinitis (as it's referred to by doctors) makes sense. According to the Asthma and Allergy Foundation of America, Atlanta is one of the country's top 20 worst cities for spring allergy sufferers. And this year, the organization also bestowed upon Atlanta the designation of Top 2007 Asthma Capital.

"Our pollen counts are higher than most other places, and this has to do with our temperate climate," explained Stanley M. Fineman, M.D., M.B.A., an allergist and immunologist with the Atlanta Allergy & Asthma Clinic. "We find that a lot of people have difficulties with allergies in the springtime because the pollen counts are so high and people are exposed to the pollen, making things worse for them." Early spring is particularly bad, thanks to Atlanta's abundance of hardwood trees that begin pollinating in March and April. That's followed by the appearance of grass pollen in April and May, which extends through the summertime and actually leads directly into the city's fall allergy season, primarily marked by a variety of pollen-generating weeds, such as the ever-present ragweed.

"If you look at it in terms of the calendar, we actually have about nine months out of the year when we have pretty high pollen counts here in Atlanta," noted Timothy J. Sullivan, M.D., an allergy and immunology specialist with Atlanta ENT Sinus & Allergy Associates. "And it's pretty much a result of the natural beauty that we live in."

For many, that natural beauty is what brought them to this fair city. But if you're an allergy sufferer, Metro Atlanta's ecosystem clearly can become your foe. Fortunately, you don't have to relocate to improve the situation with your seasonal allergies. Advances in both the medical field and the consumer realm have made it possible to not only contend with your symptoms more effectively, but also avoid the allergens that affect you the most.

Spring Into Action

When you're sneezing, coughing and dealing with a headache, runny nose and burning eyes, you probably head straight for the drugstore. With so many OTC medications available today, from antihistamines and decongestants to nasal sprays and eye drops, it's easy to find temporary relief from the symptoms that ail you. And oftentimes, that's all you need to ride out springtime allergy season in Atlanta. However, sometimes those solutions are mere quick fixes, which aren't capable of addressing the accompanying issues that allergic rhinitis can cause. When you experience these additional symptoms, that's when a trip to your primary care physician could be in order.

"There are actually three main things that doctors worry about," Sullivan asserted, indicating that the first involves the common symptoms people know so well. The second is something people may not even attribute to their allergies — sleep disturbance. He continued, "If your nose swells shut when you're trying to sleep, you open your mouth. As

soon as you get down to restful sleep, it automatically shuts. Now your mouth is shut and your nose doesn't work. So people toss and turn, and this pattern goes on all night. So you may sleep eight hours, but the quality of that sleep is terrible. It's a big problem." And it's one that can lead to other complications, including sinus infections, asthma flare-ups and the exacerbation of indirect illnesses like anxiety and depression. "It's probably because of the poor quality of sleep — other illnesses do get worse because you're exhausted," Sullivan said about this third concern. "Now, we can't do anything about the weather, but we can do plenty about your allergies."

In recent years, the pharmaceutical industry has developed a number of medications that physicians can prescribe to allergy sufferers, most of which do not yield the common side effect of drowsiness that's associated with many standard OTC allergy medications. These more powerful medicines also come in the form of antihistamines and decongestants, but they also include combination medications (an antihistamine and a decongestant in one) and corticosteroids, which reduce the inflammation associated with serious allergic rhinitis or asthma. Many of these medications are extremely effective. Yet, when they have to be taken month after month to get you through Atlanta's continuous allergy seasons, it can be an expensive prospect. In addition, this form of treatment simply may not retain its potency over the course of many years. In this case, medical advances have provided doctors with another option: immunotherapy. Usually performed by an allergist or immunologist and reserved for the most acute allergy and asthma cases, immunotherapy essentially provides a vaccine for the allergens to which your body reacts.

According to both Fineman and Sullivan, immunotherapy goes to the root of the problem by identifying the specific allergens that trigger your symptoms. Skin testing, or exposing the skin to small amounts of certain allergens, is performed, followed by the use of allergy shots to desensitize the patient.

"The kind of allergic reaction that people suffer from is the same sort of thing that protects us against invasion by parasites," Sullivan commented. "The pollen is not a parasite, but the body mistakes it for one. So it thinks it's a constant invasion, and there's a serious attempt to repel the invaders. If you can identify what people are allergic to, you can inject small amounts and then larger amounts [of the allergen] so the immune system says, 'This isn't a parasite,' and shifts the immune response to a harmless one."

While the idea of getting allergy shots several times a week to build up resistance doesn't sit well with many people, recently conducted research has shown that the process can be done faster and remain safe. "There are methods now for building up to effective doses — most of the way — in one day," Sullivan revealed. "So you can avoid anywhere from 15 to 17 trips [to the doctor's office] ... You can get a dose that's already effective in one day and optimize it with just a few more once or twice a week injections, which you can spread out quickly to once a month."

This type of research is critical because of the pervasive nature of allergies. "They are very common; we see 30 percent of the population having some kind of problem with allergies," Fineman attested. "It's important to do the research and develop therapies that can help so many people." Sullivan concurred, stating, "It's crucial to moving ahead, and there are plenty of things in the pipeline. In terms of the immediate future, it's going to be small changes. And in terms of cures, we haven't given up — there's a lot of work being done."



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Evade The Invaders

Although Fineman advocates the beneficial medical options that are available for allergy sufferers, he also suggested, "The best way to treat [allergic rhinitis] is to avoid exposure to the allergen." When it comes to pollen in Atlanta that can be a rather difficult task. Difficult, but not impossible. Besides the basics,

like staying inside, keeping the windows closed in the house or in the car and washing your clothes and your hair after coming inside on a high pollen count day, there are other preventative measures you can employ.

"We want allergy sufferers to know that medicine, prescription or OTC, is not the only path to allergy relief," said Scott Smith, director of marketing for achoo! ALLERGY & AIR Products, Inc., a Chamblee-based mail order retailer founded by allergy sufferer P. Cade McDonald in 2000. "Allergens are particles in the environment, and environmental control measures, when used alone or in concert with medication, provide allergy relief as well." From HEPA air filtration systems and HEPA filter vacuums to window filters, allergy relief bedding, nasal washes and hypoallergenic laundry detergents, achoo! ALLERGY offers a wide variety of allergy, asthma and sinus relief products that are not only designed to keep allergens under control within your home but also help to alleviate your symptoms. The HEPA products are especially helpful because the filters remove 99.97 percent of airborne particles that are .3

micrometers or larger. This includes pollen particles that are tracked inside on your clothes, shoes and hair, as well as by your pets. So, when you vacuum with a HEPA filter vacuum cleaner, for instance, instead of spewing the allergens back into the air, the interior filter traps them and keeps them from affecting your indoor air quality. Window filters are also very effective, allowing you to keep your windows open to enjoy the fresh air while eliminating 92 percent of the pollen particles you normally would let in. Achoo! ALLERGY even carries facemasks for when you have to do yard work.

“Most employees at achoo! ALLERGY are either former or current allergy sufferers, and we’re here to help fellow allergy sufferers,” Smith said. “Vacuuming with a HEPA-filtered vacuum and encasing your mattress and pillows in Allergy Armor may not be as easy as swallowing a pill, but if you avoid the allergens that make you sick, then you’ll feel better. It’s that simple.”

That’s the same premise behind the advice offered by Jeff Bishop, technical advisor for the Institute of Inspection, Cleaning and Restoration Certification, a nonprofit organization that develops the standards for many cleaning industries, including the carpet and upholstery cleaning trades. “Cleaning and maintaining your carpets and upholstery doesn’t cost, it pays,” he observed, recommending that you have your carpets and furniture cleaned at least once a year by a trained and certified professional. That can be followed up every six months with a thorough cleaning of the

high traffic areas in your house to remove any pollen particles. Bishop suggests using a professional carpet cleaner because of the access he or she will have to some of the industry’s newest technology, including a piece of equipment that was adapted from a

NASA scanner that’s used to read chemical barcodes. This addition to the carpet cleaning industry is actually a handheld scanner that can determine how much soil and contaminants are removed from a carpet – something that ultimately ensures your

COUNT ON IT

Throughout the year, the Atlanta Allergy & Asthma Clinic keeps track of the pollen count on a daily basis. So, while you think you may be able to determine the pollen count by running your finger over the blanket of yellow dust covering your car in the morning, you might want to check with the technicians at this renowned facility first. Every Monday through Friday, they post the daily pollen count online at www.atlantaallergy.com. You also can have the pollen count emailed to you by signing up for a daily notification.

ALLERGIES ATTACK



PHOTO COURTESY OF ACHOO! ALLERGY & AIR PRODUCTS

The Austin Air Purifier is one of achool! ALLERGY & AIR's selection of mail-order products for allergy sufferers.

carpets are spotless and do not contain harmful allergens. As Bishop declared, "It's literally rocket science."

While rocket science, per se, has not been applied to the Healthy House of the South, this 6,600-square-foot custom home created by Dennis McConnell, president of McConnell Homes, is the manifestation of thoughtful design merged with innovative and environmentally-sound building techniques and materials. Known as the Allergy Free Home in the Virginia Highlands, the house was built in collaboration with the American Lung Association (ALA) to ensure that it is not only energy efficient, but also boasts exceptional indoor air quality. In fact, the ALA oversaw the inspections and performance testing of the home to guarantee that it met the standards of the Health House Program so it could be certified allergy-free.

According to McConnell, Health Homes have been exclusive to northern locales until now. "We worked with Southface Energy Institute to adapt the program requirements for a southern environment," he said. The first of its kind in this region and a major step forward in taking allergy sufferers' needs into consideration, the Healthy House of the South has such features as sealed building envelopes that keep pollen from entering the home, high efficiency HEPA filters in the HVAC system, sealed combustion heating and water heating equipment, a passive radon mitigation system and low VOC materials. "It's a very tightly sealed house, so it's a controlled environment," McConnell continued. "And one of the hallmarks is

IT'S ALL INSIDE

Pollen is a major issue when it comes to allergies, but that's not the only allergen you have to worry about. Indoor allergens, such as dust mites, mold, carbon monoxide, radon, volatile organic compounds, environmental tobacco smoke and pet dander, among others, can be detrimental to your health. In fact, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) revealed that indoor air quality can be two to five times worse than outdoor air quality. And since Americans spend nearly 90 percent of their time indoors these days, it's a topic you should consider.

To learn more about indoor air quality issues and what you can do to create a healthy indoor environment in your home, take a few moments to visit these sites:

EPA – "The Inside Story: A Guide to Indoor Air Quality"

www.epa.gov/iaq/pubs/insidest.html

Indoor Air Quality Association

www.iaqa.org

American Lung Association

www.lungusa.org/site

that there is almost no dust or ambient pollen in the house.” And the real beauty of the home, which is open for tours on Sundays from 2 to 5 p.m., is that you can have McConnell build one just like it for you. “It’s in the realm of possibility for every

family,” he stated, mentioning that it only adds a percent or two in cost to the standard price of constructing a home. Of course, current homes can be retrofitted with some of the features found in the Healthy House of the South, such as the HVAC HEPA fil-

ters, but to have a new home built using the combined standards of EarthCraft, Energy Star and Environments for Living could take your health to a whole new level.

Win The Battle

The City of Trees will always present allergy sufferers with a great dichotomy: while you may love Atlanta’s natural beauty, you probably won’t love enduring the allergy seasons that come with it. Of course, with so many medical advances and new consumer products on the market, there are many things you can do to manage your symptoms and enjoy the picturesque landscape that Atlanta and its widespread suburbs have to offer. As Sullivan said, “If you’re tired of being sick and tired, it’s time to do something!” ❁

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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