

Problem → Solved!

Seasonal Allergies

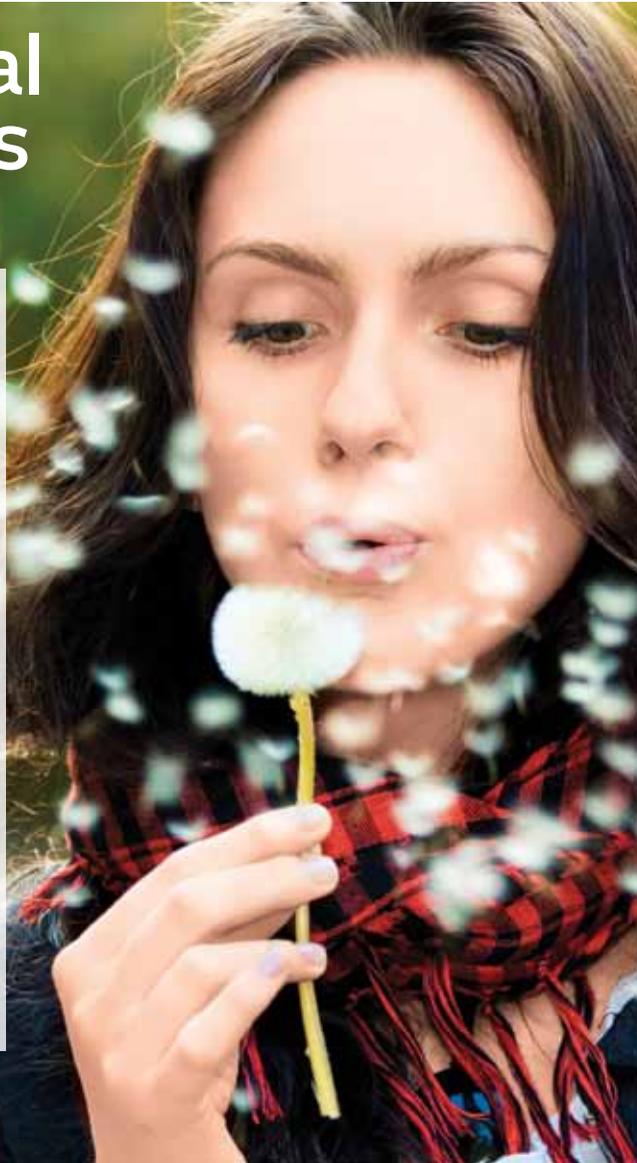
BY Marisa Cohen and Neeti Jha

WHAT IT IS:

Runny nose, nasal congestion, itchy and watery eyes, and sneezing—they're a rite of spring (and fall) for the 15 % Indians plagued by seasonal allergic rhinitis. And thanks to changes in climate, diet, lifestyle and increase in stressors, the number of sufferers is rising, says Dr Sitesh Roy, a US-Board certified allergist-immunologist and medical director of Dr Roy Health Solutions, Mumbai.

WHY IT HAPPENS:

When plants/trees/weeds pollinate, they send pollen into the air. Some people's immune systems respond by producing IgE antibodies that attach to cells in the nose, eyes, and lungs that release histamine, the main chemical that causes the symptoms.



SHUTTERSTOCK/INDIAPICTURE

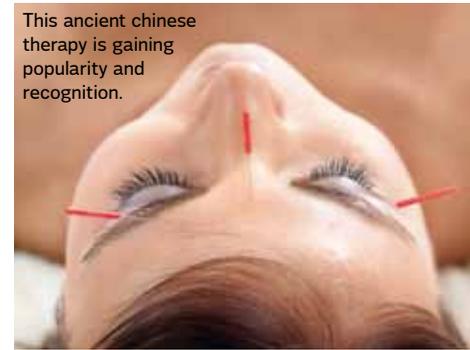
HOW TO SOLVE: ALLERGIES

WHAT'S NEW

→ ACUPUNCTURE

People suffering from allergic rhinitis (hay fever) who underwent 12 acupuncture sessions experienced fewer symptoms and required less antihistamine medication compared to a control group, according to a new study in *Annals of Internal Medicine*. "Typically 20 sessions (an hour each) are recommended. "It starts with daily sessions for a week. It is then reduced to thrice a week and then twice a week, as the condition improves," says Dr Raman Kapur, HOD, Acupuncture, Sir Ganga Ram Hospital, New Delhi. Newer therapies, such as auto-immunisation, where 1 ml blood of is drawn from one acupuncture point and injected into another acupuncture point in the patient's body to increase immunity and produce antibodies are also being tried.

This ancient Chinese therapy is gaining popularity and recognition.



→ SUBLINGUAL IMMUNOTHERAPY (SLIT)

Immunotherapy is a preventive treatment in which you're given gradually increasing doses of an allergen(s) (to which you've been detected to be sensitised, by allergy skin testing or new-age blood tests), so as to desensitise your immune system. Says Roy, "For a very long time, injections were used world-wide for immunotherapy. But, in the last 20 years, in Europe and other parts of the world, including India, many such patients are given a treatment called SLIT, in which you place tablets or drops of allergen extracts under your tongue. These prescription drops aren't as quickly effective as shots, but they're safer as there's less risk of serious side-effects, such as anaphylaxis (a life-threatening allergic reaction). Plus, it can be conveniently done at home in just 2-3 minutes, once-a-day for as long as 3 to 5 years."

→ ORAL MONTELUKAST

Originally developed to treat asthma, this prescription drug has clearly shown benefit for allergies too. "Montelukast pills block the actions of leukotrienes, inflammatory chemicals that are released by allergic reactions and cause tightening/swelling of the airways and produce mucus," explains Roy. Several studies have shown that montelukast is effective as a treatment for the seasonal allergies that typically strike in the spring and fall, when pollen levels are at their highest. "Potential side-effects of montelukast include headache, occasional digestive issues and rarely sleep/behavioural problems.

HOW TO SOLVE: ALLERGIES

WHAT'S NATURAL

→ NASAL SALINE FLUSHING

It's a common-sense solution—remove the pollen, dust and other allergens from your nasal passages so they won't bother you. "Jala neti therefore helps in controlling nasal allergies," says Ayurvedic physician at SOUKYA, Dr Narayan Namboodiri. "Learn the technique under expert guidance. First, boil and cool water till lukewarm and add ½ tsp salt to a glassful. Fill the neti pot with this saline water. Stand with feet apart and bend over the sink, tilting your head at an angle so that one nostril is above the other. While breathing through the mouth, start pouring the water through the upper nostril. If the position and technique are right, the water automatically flows out through the lower nostril. After letting the entire water flow out, do kapalabhati, before continuing the wash on the other side," he says.



Jal neti clears the nasal passage and provides relief.

→ CONTROLLING YOUR ENVIRONMENT

You'll fight allergies more effectively if you know what you're allergic to. A skin or blood test from an allergist/immunologist will narrow down your particular allergens, so you can avoid them. "Controlling common, year-round allergens, like house dust mites and pet dander (if you are sensitive to them) can greatly reduce seasonal flare-ups due to pollen or moulds. Also, avoid drying clothes outside as pollen grains stuck to them could trigger reactions later on," says Roy. "Wearing a mask to prevent direct inhalation of pollens, and glasses to protect the eyes. Keeping windows shut can also help to lower your exposure to pollens. Also, after getting checked by an allergist/immunologist, start medication at least a month before the pollen season," advises Dr Sujoy Khan, consultant allergist & immunologist, Apollo Gleneagles Hospital, Kolkata.

→ HOMOEOPATHY

"Constitutional homoeopathic medicines, such as Arsenicum album, Sulphur, Psorinum, Phosphorus, Tuberculinum help in reducing sensitivity to the allergen(s). Taken for 3 to 6 months, they show a reduction in the number of allergy episodes and severity of complaints. Acute medicines, such as Arundo, Allium Cepa, Euphrasia, Sabadilla, Rhus Tox provide relief in 3 to 4 days," says Dr Sheeja M, homoeopathy physician at SOUKYA International Holistic Health Centre, Bengaluru. The two major components of allergy treatment—symptomatic management and root cause management—are supplemented by diet advice, lifestyle correction and medication.

SHUTTERSTOCK/INDIAPICTURE

PHOTOGRAPH BY VINTAGE ROBOT

HOW TO SOLVE: ALLERGIES

WHAT'S TRIED & TRUE

→ ORAL ANTIHISTAMINES

These drugs work by blocking the inflammation-causing histamine that your body produces in reaction to allergens. The first generation of antihistamines, such as Benadryl, could make people drowsy and worked for only 4 to 6 hours; the second, longer-acting generation includes loratadine, cetirizine and fexofenadine. "A third generation, levocetirizine and desloratadine claim to prevent symptoms for 12-24 hours. They are best started 2 weeks before the pollen season begins and continued through it," says Roy.



Antihistamines help many sufferers control symptoms.

→ NASAL SPRAYS

"Oxymetazoline nasal sprays give immediate relief in cases of blocked nose. An OTC spray works fine in such cases," says Prevention advisor Dr Arun Agarwal, director, ENT Department, Maulana Azad Medical College, Delhi. However, for proper management of allergic rhinitis and reducing inflammation in the nasal passageway, he suggests using steroid-based prescription nasal sprays.

→ EYEDROPS

"If your most irritating allergy symptom is red, itchy eyes (allergic conjunctivitis), then anti-histamine eye drops, such as Olopatadine provide soothing relief," says Khan.

→ SUBCUTANEOUS IMMUNOTHERAPY (SCIT)

With SCIT (allergy shots), you're given injections of allergens at increasing dosages until your immune system becomes less sensitive to them. "Treatment typically involves once-to twice-weekly shots for the first 3 months (up dosing phase), then monthly injections for 3 years (maintenance phase)," explains Khan. The upside: they work. A 2009 review found that SCIT provides significant relief. "It can potentially even be curative in selected allergies. The effect can last a lifetime," says Roy. The downsides: the time commitment, discomfort, and risk (though small) of side-effects, such as occasional local redness/swelling at the injection site, rarely hives and very rarely anaphylaxis. He adds, "Modified allergoid injections further reduce these reactions greatly."