

How to Find Relief from Spring Allergies

Arlington allergist Sally Joo Bailey explains what triggers seasonal sniffles and what can soothe them.

33 minutes ago [Stephanie Kanowitz](#)



'Tis the season for tissues. Arlington allergist Sally Joo Baily offers tips for allergy sufferers. (Photo by Diana Polekhina on Unsplash)

Spring has sprung in the DMV, bringing warmer temperatures, longer days, colorful blooms and way too much pollen. Although Arlington didn't make the cut as one of the Asthma and Allergy Foundation of America's (AAFA) *2024 Allergy Capitals*, those of us with tissues plastered to our faces might agree to disagree.

Watery eyes and runny (or stuffy) noses are the spring look in this region. But we're not alone. In 2021, about **81 million people nationwide were diagnosed with hay fever**, known in medical terms as seasonal allergic rhinitis. That's about 26% of all adults and 19% of children.

"An allergy occurs when the body's immune system sees a substance as harmful and overreacts to it," **according to AAFA**. This time of year, common allergens in our area are tree, grass and weed pollen. Wind picks up the tiny particles and deposits them into your eyes, nose and lungs, causing symptoms in people who are allergic to them.

To better understand seasonal allergies—and especially how to find comfort during a reaction—we contacted Sally Joo Bailey, who treats adults and children at her Arlington practice, **Allergy Associates of Northern Virginia**. Here's what she had to say. The following conversation was edited for clarity and length.



Allergist Sally Joo Bailey (Courtesy photo)

Is it true that allergies are particularly bad in this area?

This is a very lush, beautiful floral area. All the trees have blooming flowers, but unlike perennials such as daffodils and tulips, which are pollinated by insects such as bees, tree flowers require the wind to carry them. The tree pollen floats in the air, which is why we unfortunately get coated with it, breathe it in our nasal/respiratory passages and get it in our eyes.

What causes someone to have allergies?

Allergies are caused by genetic predisposition and environmental exposure. You inherit the tendency for developing allergies from your parents or grandparents. Being exposed to certain allergens then triggers your body's immune system to develop the allergy.

Can you develop allergies over time?

Yes, you can develop allergies with exposure over time. Many people who move to this area do not have allergy symptoms right away, but typically they develop them after a few years. I tell them, “It’s your welcome to the Arlington/D.C. area.” Others tell me they always had mild allergies, but after they moved here, they became much more intense.

What are common symptoms?

Sneezing; coughing; runny nose; itchy, watery eyes; cough; fatigue; rash; and even asthma attacks are all common symptoms of spring allergies. Left untreated, these symptoms, especially in our nasal cavities, can lead to a sinus infection or ear infection.

How can you tell the difference between a cold and allergies?

With a cold, you often have a fever and body aches that should resolve after a week. With allergies, there should not be a fever associated with your symptoms. Typically, the symptoms persist for several weeks to months.

When should you see a doctor?

You should see a doctor about your allergies if you have symptoms each year or for most of the year; when your symptoms are not well-controlled with over-the-counter medications; if you have asthma triggered by your allergies; or you are not able to tolerate the side effects of your allergy medications, such as drowsiness.

What are some non-medicinal ways to alleviate them?

To alleviate allergy symptoms, I recommend patients keep their windows closed in their home and in their cars; shower when they come home and before bed, including washing their hair; and use a nasal saline rinse (such as a Neti pot or rinse bottle) and rewetting eye drops to help flush out pollen.

What about over-the-counter or prescription medications?

Antihistamines, steroid nasal sprays, antihistamine nasal sprays and antihistamine eye drops can be very helpful to manage symptoms. Allergen immunotherapy is the most helpful for long-term, and in some cases, lifelong relief from allergies. Allergen immunotherapy is available both as injections given at the allergist's or doctor's office and sublingually (under the tongue), which you can take at home. It works by gradually exposing the patient to increasing doses of the allergen so that they begin to build a tolerance.

When can people expect to start feeling relief and discontinue treatment?

If people are allergic to just tree pollens, they should have relief starting in late April to early May, but if they also have grass pollen allergies, their symptoms may persist until the end of June.

Any other advice?

Rinse off the pollen from your car and outdoor furniture to reduce exposure. Switch your A/C on in your car on warm days instead of opening the windows. Consider HEPA air cleaners in your home to filter particles out of the air. See your local allergists for long-term treatment, such as immunotherapy, if you are experiencing symptoms every year.