

EYE-Q

by R. Thomas Barowsky, MD

I Got the Big Time Itchy Burnies

Sounds a lot like the title to a Muddy Waters blues rendition; not so the case here Well, the allergy season in North Carolina seems to be off to a big start this year bringing on the watery itchy eyes allergy sufferers know so well. If you are one of the scores of sufferers of seasonal allergic conjunctivitis you know exactly of what I speak. The eyes are constantly red; they water like a leaky faucet and oh how they itch. What is all of this about?

These symptoms of the season are caused by our body's natural defenses recognizing a foreign substance and trying to rid us of it. The foreign invader can be pollen, spores, dust or any of a number of other substances borne on the wind. The body sends white blood cells, called monocytes, to the site of invasion in an effort to subdue the allergen. There these brave first line defenders dump little packets of chemicals called histamines which cause congestion of the blood vessels and itching of the tissues. That is why the most popular over-the-counter (OTC) remedy for allergic symptoms is the antihistamine/decongestant eye drop. It has the ability to block the affect of the histamine and make you more comfortable. Well at least for a little while. As you use more and more antihistamine/decongestant drops to make the eyes feel better, the monocytes continue to dump more and more histamines onto the eyes to fight the allergens that are still there. Eventually the eye becomes immune to the effects of the eye drops and your eyes become even more red and watery and itchy. Pretty soon you're putting the drops in constantly in a vain attempt to rescue them from the allergic reaction and they only feel worse.

So what is the solution? I'm glad you asked. There are many ways of dealing with seasonal allergies in the eyes. If you can't head off to some desert paradise until the season has run its course then you must try other solutions. Of first importance is keeping the allergens out of your eyes. The eyes water because they are trying to wash them clean. Washing your hands frequently and not rubbing your eyes are two great ways to reduce the effect of the allergy. Consider the amount of pollen, spores, dust, etc that come in contact with those meaty paws. Now let's all rub our eyes without washing our hands and think about all of that stuff on your hands now being introduced to your eyes. Got the picture? You just dumped a load of allergy producing junk into your eyes and now they're going to feel even worse.

Using a good quality artificial tear or eyewash to help irrigate the offenders from the eye is also helpful. Be sure to use a good quality artificial tear preparation and avoid anything that offers or promises to "Get the Red Out." These drops contain antihistamines and decongestants, which we all know are not the best thing to be using frequently. The selective use of OTC allergy drops can be of benefit, just don't overdo it. Oral allergy medications do have some benefit for sufferers with eye allergies but they also have the

typical side effects of drowsiness, which makes driving or operating heavy machinery more hazardous; not to mention that little caution of not consuming certain adult type beverages while using these medications.

When these simple treatments for allergic conjunctivitis fail you there are a number of additional prescription eye drops that can come to the rescue by providing relief. We'll talk about them next week.

If you have questions about your eye health e-mail Dr. Barowsky at doctom@tdkj.com and we'll try to answer your questions here at Eye-Q.