



April 6, 2009

Allergies vs. colds: Can you tell the difference?

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There is more than spring in the air.

Runny noses, watery eyes, sneezing and itching are signs that it is allergy season in Northern Nevada and tree pollen is blowing in the wind.

Although the symptoms are similar to a cold, Dr. Nevin Wilson, an allergy specialist at the University of Nevada School of Medicine in Reno, said a person should be able to tell the difference.

"The problem is, people who have allergies tend to also get more colds," Wilson said. "They're separate, but can happen at the same time, particularly at this time of the year."

Here are some of the differences between allergies and a cold that Wilson pointed out:

- Sneezing is more persistent with an allergy.
- Discharge from a person's nose will start turning green or yellow, then turn clear and go away with a cold. With allergies, it will tend to remain clear.
- Other symptoms, such as fever and sore throat, tend to be associated with a cold. Fever and muscle aches are good indicators that it is a cold.
- You generally won't get a sore throat with allergies, but you will with a typical cold.
- Both will give you a general feeling of being run down, but it is a longer run-down feeling with allergies.
- The nose and eyes itch more with an allergy than with a cold.
- The dry air and extended season cause more allergy problems in Northern Nevada than in other areas, Wilson said. Grass pollen in the late spring/early summer follows the pollination of elm, maple and cotton birch trees.
- The weed season with heavy sage brush, Russian thistle and ragweed, starts around the end of July.

"In reality, it starts in March and goes until October," he said. "Simply because it's drier and the wind blows, people are exposed to pollen all day."

Even though there are a lot more plants in the East, he said, the amount of water in the air settles the pollen more quickly.

Varied treatments

Allergy treatment ranges from traditional medicine to a new alternative treatment that combines the principles of Eastern medicine with technology.

The typical medical treatment for inflammation of the nose is a long-acting antihistamine and a topical nasal spray, Wilson said.

"If the symptom is more itching and sneezing, then an antihistamine is more important," he said. "If the symptoms are more congestion and unable to breathe, then nasal spray is more effective."

If the patient is on medications all the time and still having symptoms, then it is time to consider allergy shots, he said.

"The shots really do work," he said. "Studies show that they're effective. We've learned a lot about how they work."

Dale Kelly, a longtime Sparks chiropractor who has begun the Allergy Care Center, said he has a method for treating allergies without a scratch test, injection or medication.

"We fix the problem," Kelly said. "We don't give you pills to Band-Aid the problem."

He uses computerized biofeedback, called Bio-Allergenix, to identify what the body's immune system is overreacting to. He then uses a laser, which acts like acupuncture without the needles on specific energy points on the body, to retrain the brain and body not to send out immune response when you're exposed to normal things.

The number of required treatments depends upon the number of allergies a person have.

Although Kelly only has had the system in his office since last July, he said he averages about 20 clients a day.
