

Allergy season is here. Though winter isn't over, the trees in Nebraska are starting to pollinate. Sneezing, nasal congestion, itchy nose and itchy, watery eyes are the classic symptoms.

Known as seasonal allergic rhinitis, allergies are reactions of the body's immune system to a normally harmless substance. In the spring, summer and fall, tiny pollen grains are released from trees, weeds and grasses. These grains hitch rides on currents of air.

University of Nebraska Medical Center Allergist Jill Poole, M.D., said about 20 percent to 40 percent of Americans suffer from seasonal allergies.

"This is the time when spring allergies catch up with you," said Dr. Poole, an associate professor in the UNMC Department of Internal Medicine. "The trees start pollenating and this is the exact time to get allergy medications out of the cabinet and start to use nose sprays and antihistamines. I advise patients to do this to try to fend off the allergy symptoms before they get behind the eight ball."

Dr. Poole said if you have allergy symptoms and over-the-counter medications don't work well, she recommends getting tested.

Here are tips on how to lessen the uncomfortable effects of allergies:

- Tree pollen is hardy and once it gets in the home, it can be a longer lasting pollen. Closing windows will keep the pollen from being in your bedroom where you sleep.
- After you've been outside, it's helpful to change your clothes and wash your hands and face.
- Try over-the-counter nasal-sinus irrigation products.
- Over-the-counter antihistamines are non-sedating and usually work in a couple of days.

For more information about allergies, go to www.aaaai.org.