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Personal Health

By JANE E. BRODY

Do you start sneezing soon after the air conditioner is turned on in the car?

Do your nasal and sinus passages become congested when you work in the garden, basement or garage?

Do you feel lousy on rainy days?

If you answer "yes" to such questions, chances are you are allergic to molds, the ubiquitous fungi that thrive on plant and animal matter. The tiny reproductive spores released by molds are second only to pollen as a cause of discomfort from allergies to airborne substances.

Like pollen, molds can touch off symptoms of allergic rhinitis -- a runny, stuffy nose, itchy eyes and throat, fatigue and general discomfort. Molds may also set off asthma attacks.

Unlike pollen, which causes seasonal allergy attacks, molds can be a perennial plague. But exposure to mold is likely to peak in the spring and summer months. Mold allergy symptoms commonly show up in mid-summer between the seasons for grass pollen and ragweed allergies. Whither the Culprits?

Molds thrive in damp places and in humid, hot weather. They are common contaminants in humidifiers, dehumidifiers and air conditioners, in shower stalls, damp basements and musty garages, in poorly ventilated or unheated rooms and summer cabins that are closed all winter, in plant debris, on sleeping bags, mattresses, pillows and tents, and on outdoor furniture cushions and flower pots.

You might also find patches of mildew, or mold growth, indoors, in vegetable bins and clothes closets, on leather and fur clothing and upholstery, on damp walls and carpets, and even on wallpaper and paint. In houses in which water accumulates in the basement or underneath the house, molds can flourish throughout the living areas.

To further complicate matters, there are seasonal molds that grow on field crops and foliage. For example, in the northern states, spores of the common outdoor molds *Alternaria* and *Hormondendrum* begin to float in the air in May, reaching peak levels from July through October. Molds also thrive in wetland areas and along the shores of seas and lakes.

Because they are so tiny and light, the spores released by molds can be carried great distances by wind. Like pollen, mold spores are widely dispersed on dry, windy days. Who Suffers?

Mold spore allergy typically develops in childhood, but it can show up at any time of life, particularly if a change in work or recreational habits results in increased exposure to molds. The allergy is also common among people in jobs that heavily expose them to mold spores, including furniture repairers, gardeners, fruit and vegetable workers, farmers and botanists, mill workers and anyone who works in damp or musty places.

Mold allergies are more common in the Midwest, where the air tends to be heavily laden with spores from agricultural sources, than on the Atlantic and Pacific coasts. People with mold spore allergy commonly feel the most discomfort early in the morning. Avoiding Exposure

Reducing the growth of molds in and around the house can be a chore, but it will almost certainly bring relief to urban and suburban sufferers:

*Rid the yard and deck of plant debris, containers and rubbish that can retain moisture and become growth centers for molds.

*If the basement is damp, install a dehumidifier and treat the walls, floor and furnishings with an anti-mildew spray.

*Discard all old, damp objects like furniture cushions, pillows, rugs, stuffed animals and piles of magazines and newspapers.

*Use space heaters to dry out damp rooms and treat the rooms with an anti-mildew spray.

*Regularly clean humidifiers, dehumidifiers, air conditioners and, if possible, the drip tray under the refrigerator, to prevent mold growth in standing water.

*If there is no simple way to get rid of water under the house, plastic sheeting should be installed to prevent the moisture from rising into the living areas.

Other strategies include staying out of the damp woods and away from the seashore. Visits to summer cabins are also not recommended.

If you go camping, use sleeping bags that are filled with Dacron, which dries quickly and does not support mold growth, and make sure all equipment is thoroughly dried before it is packed away.

At home, use mildew-resistant paints instead of wallpaper, especially in damp rooms like bathrooms. Also spray such rooms periodically with a mildew-suppressing product. Keep the refrigerator clean, wipe up spills when they occur, keep the vegetable bin dry and avoid prolonged storage of foods like onions and garlic.

A person with serious mold allergies should forget about having indoor plants and aquariums, according to Dr. Lyndon K. Jordan, an allergist in Durham, N.C. He also recommends keeping wet shoes, boots and clothes out of the bedroom closet. And he says closets should be kept closed at night and open during the day, preferably with the closet light burning to keep them dry.

As for the air conditioner in the car, just before the air-cooling season have the system serviced and thoroughly cleaned. Then, when you expect to use it, open all the car windows, turn on the ignition and the air conditioner, get out of the car and let the unit run for 10 to 15 minutes. When you are ready to go, close all the windows.

Still another alternative involves the use of a chemical deodorizer that kills molds in automobile air conditioners. The treatment, RenNew-A/C, is made by Alcide Corporation of Norwalk, Conn., and can be bought at Napa and Car Quest stores and at many large Ford, General Motors, Sterling and Volvo dealerships. It must be professionally applied.