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Welcome to this edition of Patient Listening a Podcast service from Marshfield Clinic where we present health topics to you without all the technical jargon so you can get information that is easy to understand and useful to you in your everyday life. I'm your host John Tracy.

It's hard to believe but spring is finally here and with that comes the allergy season. For some tree, grass, and other pollens that appear throughout the spring, summer and fall seasons can make for a miserable experience. On the other hand treating these allergies can make a huge difference.

Dr. Marshall Cusic Jr. is an Allergist at the Marshfield Center of Marshfield Clinic. His approach to treating allergies is to first understand what allergy is.

Cusic:

Well its interesting allergy is a word that we've used for a long time and I really think it means different things to different people. To a patient of course what it means is that you have a certain set of symptoms: stuffy nose, itchy/watery eyes, sometimes wheezing sometimes a rash that comes from something that is ordinarily harmless or when you come in contact with it that you get an unwanted reaction; you get a certain set of symptoms. And then to a physician, technically to an allergist there is a certain sequence of events through your immune system that starts out perfectly harmless such as household dust, pollen, or animal dander in the air. Then when your system comes in contact with these, its reacts and leads to this inflammation. So I mean the reason I say the difference between physician and patients is that sometimes patients will get around things that are irritating and not an allergy, such as saw dust or something of that role. Sometimes they think that is an allergy. Or infections, sometimes patients will confuse a sinus infection with allergies. But really allergies are when you come in contact with particles in the air that your immune system is sensitive to and triggers this set of symptoms we call allergies.

John:

So tell me then from what you've seen, when does allergy season start in our area?

Cusic:

Allergy season begins in maybe the end of March but really towards the middle end of April. We would actually count pollen in the air to determine that. It's just like clockwork that every year, the most we persue, we start to see different tree pollens in the end of April, and even according to the different trees. The maples seem to go first, and then the oaks are last and you can see and identify that in the air. Then grass pollen kicks in in the middle of May and maybe lasts till the end of June. Then there is late summer to fall that we call ragweed and that's start to so up in September, October. It's just like an orchestra that nature is conducting. It's very, very reliable. And so early spring allergies you know

are generally tree allergies, middle to later spring it is generally grass pollen. And outdoor molds seem to peak in the middle-end of the summer, but that's not nearly as consistent because the molds are more dependent on the dryness and moisture and wind blowing and so-forth. And that's the seasonal outdoor allergy season. Really you can be allergic all year round depending on what you are allergic to. If you allergic to dogs and cats and house dust, and many people are, then your allergies can be all year round. But usually when we talk about hay fever that is generally the ubiquitous cause of allergies and that begins with pollen season. When we start seeing pollen in the air, Marshfield Clinic has for years been counting those amounts.

John:

How do seasonal allergies develop over time?

Cusic:

That is interesting; allergies tend to run in families. And people, it kind of sneaks up on you, you aren't usually born with allergies you are born with the potential to become allergic and you develop them over time. But they usually don't start showing up until school time and then school years go by and that's when we start to see it. It's really at that time you have years of experience under your belt. You know a two year old doesn't have much experience under their belts and it takes times for allergies to develop. So I guess what I see a lot is patients develop allergies at a young age and they continue to feel the effects of the allergy as they grow up and it just becomes part of their lives. And their families seem to look at it this way of "oh that is just how Johnny or Sue is. They have allergies."

John:

So if you're aware of the allergy you can plan ahead and start treating before the season begins?

Cusic:

Well the best way is to start treatment before the season begins. You do need to know what treatment is, understand what the treatment is. And you need to avoid whatever you are allergic to; that is THE best treatment. Of course the thing that keeps me in business; that people see me for so many things even if you understand it you cannot stay away from it, tree pollen and so forth. So that's where medicines come in and other treatments. And just because you can't avoid something doesn't mean you can't reduce your exposure. So if you are highly allergic to pollens, if you have air conditioning in your home and in your car; close the windows so you can reduce your exposure. The only problem with that is that here in Wisconsin it gets pretty warm and who wants to stay inside when they can go outside. So that tends to be a little problematic, hard to do. But so avoiding exposure if you can and medicines. Again it depends on your level of allergy. If it's very mild, you can, you know there are over the counter antihistamines or eye drops and they are very good and they have very excellent side effect profiles. They don't seem to cause drowsiness too much and people can take them over the counter so they can take them when they have symptoms. For example Loratadine, which was originally brought out under the name of Claritin, but it is now available in other forms such as

Alavert. Once that patent runs out then they can market them under their own name. People use the word generic sometimes and that's what they are: generic. But I don't like to call them that because that implies they are not as good. So I use the term scientific.

John:

Another option for those who suffer from seasonal allergies is allergy shots. What are allergy shots, and how do they work?

Cusic:

If you have really bad allergies, even staying away from and medicines don't take care of, the third way we have to treat these are by allergy injections. And that is a time honored treatment we use for years and we really have gotten quite good at this. It isn't a cure, but it is a good way to build up your immune systems tolerance and resistance to the reaction. So you can tolerate so many exposures without symptoms. It's like an immunization, not like you get for the measles where it reduces your risk of infection. When I say immunization I mean it helps to decrease your immune systems response. It's meant to help you, not hurt you. It isn't a cure, as most people know. Some people think of them as a cure but they are not really. They tend to wear off over time in some people, and you would need boosters. Allergy shots are the same except you complete the treatment it seems to last for quite a while/years. And it almost seems like a cure sometimes. But to answer your question it is different in everybody, but we noticed that there is a schedule, a systematic exposure that once you identify the type of allergy you have, and we take that allergen, whether it is dust or ragweed, and we take water and dilute it down so it's really, really small. Even with allergies there has to be a small enough level that someone allergic can handle it. So we have worked on a schedule and trained allergist how to give it to people in certain amount and then build it up, increase it little by little by little. It's a lot of work and a big homework assignment, especially for kids, but remember it has to be done under a physicians care because potentially there is some instances, but most people tolerate these schedules well. To answer your question, it usually takes about three to four months. That is the hard part, after that we can usually stretch it out to every three months, sometimes a little longer. But that can go on for several years.

John:

So for a long time allergy sufferer who is looking for an alternative to the medicines and other strategies that we talked about how can they get started on allergy shots?

Cusic:

That is a good point. We would not start allergy injections now or to treat this coming season because it does take several months to build up so we encourage people to see, I would see people this time of year and say "ok here's what's happening" which is an important thing to understand. Then you would take medicines, stay away from it if you can, though if it is pollen it is hard to stay away from. Then you take the medicine through the season and I usually see people at the end of the season and if they say "hey that Loratadine really did it" then I tell them that is the way to do it and we will just take

care of it that way. But for many people if it's much of a problem, they will say, "oh it helped a bit but I'm still having problems." Then I say ok we should talk about what else to do and often the next step is allergy injections.

If you are or someone you know suffers from seasonal allergies, and the over the counter methods of managing the symptoms isn't giving you the best outcome, contact your Marshfield Clinic physician and ask them if allergy injections are an option for you.

Marshfield Clinic has locations throughout central, western and northern Wisconsin.

That's all we have for this edition of Patient Listening. On behalf of Dr. Cusic, I'm John Tracy.

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