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Man's Best Friend? Not During Hay Fever Season

By American College of Allergy, Asthma and Immunology
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Study Suggests Allergy to Dogs (and Cats and Dust Mites) Worsens Ragweed's Impact

(HealthNewsDigest.com) - ARLINGTON HEIGHTS, Ill. – Ragweed allergy season can be even more miserable for those with dog, cat or dust mite allergies, according to new research. These year-round allergies appear to "pre-prime" the immune system so symptoms hit harder, according to a study recently published in the Annals of Allergy, Asthma & Immunology, the scientific journal of the American College of Allergy, Asthma and Immunology (ACAAI).

Hay fever (known as seasonal allergic rhinitis) begins around the middle of August, when ragweed blooms. The typical symptoms – sneezing, itching, stuffy nose and watery eyes – can make sufferers miserable. Hay fever sufferers who also are allergic to cats, dogs or dust mites develop symptoms faster and (early on) more severely, the research suggests. Treating the cat, dog or dust mite allergy year round may help make the hay fever more manageable.

"People with hay fever react differently when ragweed allergy season arrives. Some start sneezing right away, and others don't, so we wanted to determine what makes certain people develop symptoms more quickly," said allergist Anne K. Ellis, MD, lead author of the study and an ACAAI member. "We tested a number of common perennial allergens and found that having an allergy to cats, dogs or dust mites sets hay fever sufferers up for faster onset of symptoms when exposed to ragweed."

The study included 123 people allergic to ragweed. Of those, 66 percent tested positive for cat allergies, 63 percent tested positive for dog allergies and 73 percent tested positive for dust mite allergies. All were exposed to ragweed for three hours in a special controlled room called the Environmental Exposure Unit (at Kingston General Hospital, Ontario), and completed symptom questionnaires every 30 minutes during exposure.

"On average, those who tested positive for cat, dog or dust mite allergies developed symptoms either faster than, or to a greater degree than those who tested negative for those allergies," said Dr. Ellis. "The differences seen at 90 minutes of exposure were less dramatic after 3 hours of exposure, however. That suggests that once the hay fever season is in full swing, the symptom differences between those with cat, dog or dust mite allergies and those without no longer exist."

To avoid the more intense early reaction, people with cat, dog and dust mite allergies should try to limit their exposure to those allergens before ragweed season starts, said Dr. Ellis. Because that often is not practical when it comes to family pets, an alternative is to treat their cat, dog or dust-mite allergies, she said.

“Allergy immunizations or year-round allergy medication can provide hay fever relief to those sufferers who have ongoing symptoms from cats, dogs or dust mites, even if they think the symptoms are mild and easily tolerated,” said Neil Kao, MD, chair of the ACAAI Rhinitis/Sinusitis Committee. “They’ll likely find ragweed allergy season easier to endure if they’re treating their perennial allergies.”

Those who suspect they have hay fever or other allergies should get tested by an allergist – a doctor who is expert in diagnosing and treating allergies and asthma. To learn more about allergies and asthma, take a free relief self-test or find an allergist near you visit www.AllergyAndAsthmaRelief.org.

About ACAAI

The ACAAI is a professional medical organization headquartered in Arlington Heights, Ill., that promotes excellence in the practice of the subspecialty of allergy and immunology. The College, comprising more than 5,000 allergists-immunologists and related health care professionals, fosters a culture of collaboration and congeniality in which its members work together and with others toward the common goals of patient care, education, advocacy and research.