

UW Health: Understanding the difference between seasonal allergies and COVID-19

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With the onset of warmer weather, seasonal allergies are beginning to wreak havoc throughout the Midwest. But with the rate of COVID-19 infections among kids and adolescents also on the rise, parents are now faced with another dilemma this Spring: determining whether their child's symptoms are a result of pollen or the coronavirus.

One of the biggest challenges, says UW Health pediatric allergist Dr. Mark Moss, is the overlap in symptoms between seasonal allergies and COVID-19 that make it more difficult for parents to differentiate between the two without testing. Those shared symptoms include nasal congestion, a runny nose, and post-nasal drip. However, there are other, more concerning symptoms that parents should be on the lookout for that are more frequently attributed to the coronavirus or other viral infection, like the flu, that suggest COVID testing is warranted.

"If a child is having respiratory symptoms, fever, chills, body aches or a sudden loss of taste or smell, parents should definitely have their child tested for COVID-19," says Moss "If there is any doubt about the cause of those symptoms, parents should always err on the side of caution rather than risk exposing other family members, classmates and the community to the virus."

Moss says the biggest difference between symptoms of seasonal allergies and COVID-19 are the itchy symptoms, such as itchy eyes, itchy nose, and sneezing. Itchiness is generally not a sign of illness. If kids are experiencing these symptoms, they are most likely due to environmental allergies and not COVID-19, and the symptoms will more than likely improve with over-the-counter allergy medication.

Parents should always consult with their pediatrician or pharmacist before giving these medications to children.

To lessen the impact of seasonal allergies, Moss suggests there are a number of practical precautions you can take to help minimize the severity of your symptoms:

- Keep your windows closed at night and, if possible, use air conditioning.
- Try to stay indoors when the pollen or mold levels are reported to be high: <http://www.aaaai.org/global/nab-pollen-counts.aspx>
- Mask wearing has been proven to lessen allergy symptoms.
- Avoid hanging sheets or clothes outside to dry to avoid bringing settled pollen into the home
- When traveling by car, keep your windows closed.
- Use a Neti Pot to flush irritants from nasal passages.

According to Moss, people with more difficult-to-treat allergies will benefit from seeing an allergist that can help identify their specific allergy triggers and develop a comprehensive treatment plan. An initial visit with an allergist will likely include an analysis of your symptoms, a physical exam, an environmental evaluation, as well as a skin test/allergy test to determine your specific allergens. The skin test is a simple, painless procedure during which trace amounts of various allergens are applied to tiny scratches made on the surface of your skin. Positive reactions will result in a small itchy bump that usually diminishes over the course of a few hours.

Pre-recorded interview with Dr. Mark Moss is available.