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## Fall's arrival is good time to understand allergies

DR. BILL MCCANN • SEPTEMBER 28, 2010

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If you get itchy after being around horses, break out in hives after eating seafood or sneeze when you're outside in a grassy meadow, it's easy to figure out what substance your body doesn't like. But many times, the source of our suffering may not be apparent. This is when a visit to the allergist can be helpful.



Skin testing is still the most sensitive way to detect allergies, though blood testing has gotten more effective. With skin testing, a drop of liquid extract of a substance — oak or grass pollen, for instance — is placed on the skin of your back using a plastic pinprick.

If you are allergic to the substance, the mast cells in that part of the skin will pop and release histamine, and you'll get an itchy hive on that spot.

If you have allergies, your immune system works fine — for the most part. It's simply that it's in overdrive against some things.

A three-step plan of care is suggested once allergies are determined:

- Stay away from what you're allergic to, even with hard-to-avoid substances like pollen. Check the local allergy forecast and don't sleep with windows open when the pollen you're allergic to is heavy.
- Don't dry laundry outside in heavy pollen times. If working outside, wear a mask, then remove pollen when you come inside by showering and washing your clothes.
- Consider helpful medications. For nasal allergies, I break folks into two groups, the "itchy sneezies" and the "stopped-up goopies."

Antihistamines, such as Benadryl, Claritin, Zyrtec or prescription medicines, work well for the itchy-sneezy people. People who are stopped up may also have year-round allergies to things like dust mites, so medicated nasal sprays or nasal steroid sprays are usually effective. Over-the-counter

sprays like Afrin are not a good option. They are for short-term emergency use only.

- Try immunotherapy or allergy shots, which can help if neither avoidance nor medications are working well. A vaccine is made up of the things to which a person is allergic — tree pollens, grass and cat dander, for instance.



Dr. Bill McCann (Special to the Citizen-Times)

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Then the person is given shots of this vaccine in increasing doses to help desensitize them and change their body's response.

Dr. Bill McCann is an allergist with Allergy Partners of Western North Carolina. He is a member and immediate past president of the Buncombe County Medical Society Corp. board.

### How can you learn more?

An audio interview with Dr. McCann covers more details as well as other topics such as asthma, penicillin allergies, smoking and sinus health, and even Dr. McCann's "nasal happiness plan."

To listen to the full podcast interview, visit

<https://www.bcmsonline.org/main/community/thephysiciansvoice.php#PodcastAllergies>.

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