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LIFE HEALTH

Allergy season arrives early in Vancouver



By Melissa Carr, Special to 24 hours
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Figuring out if you have a cold or allergies helps dictate how to deal with it. (FOTOLIA)

Sniffles, scratchy throat, sneezing, cough and headache — is it a cold or allergies? This time of year, it can be tough to tell as winter's cold season and spring's allergy season overlap. It doesn't help that this year's spring allergy season started even earlier than usual.

Even if you have never had allergies in the past, they can develop or cease at any time. If your symptoms have persisted for more than two weeks or if you have itchy, watery eyes, it is likely that they are due to allergies, and not a cold. If you have body aches and/or a fever, allergies are not the cause.

Either way, there are some things you can do that will equally treat both possibilities. Allergies are due to an overactive immune system. Colds are caused by viruses that weaken and attack the body.

Vitamin C can alternately boost immune function to fight off viruses and bacteria or decrease histamine release related to an allergic reactions. This important antioxidant nutrient is found in high quantities in oranges and other citrus fruits, of course, but also bell peppers, broccoli, kale, cauliflower, strawberries, papaya, and kiwi. Vitamin C supplements are also readily available.

Plant sterols, also known as phytosterols, are naturally occurring molecules that have been found to be immune modulators — compounds that can both strengthen an underactive immune system at the same time as they reduce an overactive immune system. Though phytosterols occur naturally in small amounts in many vegetables, fruits, grains, nuts, and seeds, for therapeutic dosages, they are best taken in supplement form.

Another way to treat both allergies and colds is to flush it out. Even the American Academy of Allergy, Asthma & Immunology recommends an ancient treatment of rinsing out the nasal passages with saline (salt) solution. The traditional method uses a neti pot, but there are also other nasal irrigators to be found in pharmacies and natural health stores.

Traditional Chinese medicine herbs and acupuncture can also help regulate the immune system, treating both colds and allergies. Some herbs focus on treating the symptoms like nasal congestion, while others work more directly on the immune system. The goal of TCM is to help the body to regulate itself and return to healthy function.

Dr. Melissa Carr is a registered doctor of traditional Chinese medicine, caring for patients in an integrative medicine clinic in Vancouver.

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