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Longer Allergy Season Linked to Climate Change

by Mary Jacobs

(DallasMorningNews) Still sneezing, even though it's December? You might be able to blame it on global warming.



Allergists are looking at the possibility that global warming produces bigger, nastier ragweed plants that pump more pollen into the atmosphere. Bottom line: If true, you'll be sneezing more often, for more days out of the year. And that could be the least of our worries.

"Climate change is potentially the largest global threat to human health ever encountered," says a study published in the *Journal of Allergy and Clinical Immunology*, which devoted its September issue to climate change and allergic disease. The issue identified ways that global warming could negatively affect people with asthma and allergies, or just with a desire to breathe with a healthy pair of lungs.

Has global warming extended Dallas' allergy season? That's too hard to pin down, says Dr. Michael Ruff, a pediatric allergist at Presbyterian Hospital of Dallas.

First, a host of factors wind currents, heat, precipitation affects pollen counts from day to day and even from one measuring station to another. And while this year's allergy season has been "robust," Dr. Ruff thinks last year's was a bit worse. (In 2007, a spate of unusually wet weather spawned huge ragweed plants, some "as big as small oak trees," Dr. Ruff says. He knows because he often checks his favorite ragweed patch, near White Rock Creek, to see how the plants are faring.)

Still, the link between global warming and longer allergy seasons makes sense.

"When CO₂ concentrations go up, ragweed grows prodigiously, and it produces more pollen," Dr. Ruff said. And if global warming, on average, delays Dallas' first frost more every year, expect the season of suffering to become noticeably and measurably longer.

So what can you do to get through the misery?

Develop habits of good pollen hygiene, suggests Dr. Richard Wasserman, medical director of pediatric allergy and immunology at Medical City Children's Hospital. Resist the temptation to open windows because the pollen count inside can quickly hit levels around 80 percent of the outdoor count. After spending time outdoors, Dr. Wasserman recommends that you immediately change clothes, take worn clothes straight to the hamper, shower, and flush nasal passages with saltwater spray.

Dr. Wasserman says linking global warming to longer allergy seasons makes scientific sense, but he keeps in mind that the link is still speculation. "I don't think the final answer is in, but for the average person, it's one more reason to worry about global warming," he said.

"It makes one stand up and notice that we really do need to do something," Dr. Ruff said. "We have to improve our air quality, so future generations don't suffer."