

**Oct. 5, 2004**

## **Fall allergies affect contact lens wear too, says Emory Eye Center: What you can do for more comfortable lenses**

Atlanta in the fall is a beautiful place. Streets canopied by orange and red leafed trees, yellow mums on every corner and bright, blue skies. However, lurking in our crisp, dry air are unseen allergens. While those beautiful fall colors abound, so does the ragweed pollen, which begins to bloom in late August, continuing until late October or mid-November. In fact pollen counts can reach numbers comparable to many a spring day.

Ragweed, often referred to as "hardy" because it grows prolifically in undeveloped places, such as fields and roadsides and can travel hundreds of miles in the air, is a prime offender in fall.

The following tips may help contact lens wearer compete with fall allergens that face them every time they go outside.

### **Challenging Lens Wear**

"Pollen may affect contact lens wearers in multiple ways," says Michael Ward, director of the Contact Lens Service at Emory Eye Center. "It's both a physical and an immunologic irritant. Pollen allergy (hay fever or allergic rhinitis) affects nearly 10 percent of Americans (26 million people), not including those with asthma.

"Trees contribute the majority of our pollens, with flowers, grasses and molds to follow," says Ward. "Our greatest physical irritant is pine pollen, a bi-lobed vesiculate pollen grain with a rough surfaced body measuring 50µm to 75µm (roughly equal to the corneal epithelium's thickness). Visualize a gentle breeze moving a yellow cloud of pine pollen that engulfs a contact lens wearer. The particles land in the tear film and instantly create significant foreign body sensation, causing pain, scratchiness and tearing. To add insult to injury (literally), an allergic reaction occurs, releasing inflammatory mediators that cause tearing, itching and swelling in susceptible individuals."

### **Tools to Fight the Irritants**

"We can help allergy sufferers by offering the following strategies to help them continue wearing their contact lenses during this difficult time," says Ward.

**Physical Barriers:** Wear goggles or sunglasses that fit close to the face when outside. Keep windows closed, including car windows.

**Air Cleaners:** High efficiency air filters can remove pollen and dust to improve air quality in central air conditioning systems. Electrostatic air cleaners also can help. Replace filters regularly as directed.

**Eye Drops:** Frequent use of low-viscosity, preservative-free artificial tears will help to dilute and rinse tear film irritants. In-eye contact lens cleaners such also can help.

**Pharmaceuticals:** Systemic antihistamines can alleviate allergic symptoms, but they also may cause ocular dryness. Use topical decongestants sparingly to avoid a rebound effect. Mast cell stabilizers help if patients use them pro-actively before symptoms occur. Combination drops seem to offer the greatest allergy symptom relief by combining immediate antihistaminic relief with the prolonged effect of mast cell stabilizers.

**Lens Care Products:** Ignore the "no rub" product labeling. Contact lens wearers should "rub and rinse" their lenses upon removal to decrease accumulated debris from the lens surfaces.

**Replace Lenses Often:** Shorten the replacement interval for soft lenses. Consider replacing lenses more frequently, which discards the allergens along with the used lenses.

**Other Helpful Hints:**

- \* Wash faces and hands often with cold water.
- \* Cold compresses help to relieve ocular itching (try putting ice cubes in a wet wash cloth). Patients should avoid wearing lenses under severe conditions.