

Highest pollen count of the season, last three years on Friday 13th

16 May 2011

Chicago's tree pollen count reached 1,500 today, triggering a dangerous air quality warning.

"Today's tree pollen count is the highest of the season, and the highest in at least three years," said Dr. Joseph Leija, an allergist at Gottlieb Memorial Hospital, part of the Loyola University Health System. "Itchy eyes, stuffy noses and fatigue will be common among Chicagoans with sensitive respiratory systems."

Dr. Leija, a regional allergy expert, warned those with tree pollen allergies to avoid eating apples, celery, peaches, pears, cherries, hazelnuts and plums. "The proteins in these produce mimic pollen proteins and can create reactions that will worsen symptoms," said Dr. Leija, who is certified by the National Allergy Bureau to perform the official allergy count for the Midwest.

"The late spring warm-up, rain, the barometric pressure change - all these elements combine to create the dangerously high tree pollen count now when the tree pollen count would typically be dropping," he said of this morning's unusual count. "Allergy sufferers should stay indoors, keep the windows closed, use their air conditioners and take their allergy medications."

Every weekday morning, Dr. Leija climbs the stairs to the rooftop of Gottlieb Memorial Hospital where he maintains a special pollen-catching machine. He carries the specimens to his office and examines them under a microscope to formulate the count.

Nationally, allergies cost businesses more than \$250 million in lost work time and patients spend more than \$3.4 billion in medicines and doctors' fees, according to the American Academy of Allergy, Asthma & Immunology.

"Elm, mulberry, oak, maple - the cold winter and cold spring made trees dormant, but the recent

warm weather has them beautifully green and leafy almost overnight. It's almost pure poison to many with sensitive systems," Dr. Leija said.

Normally the tree pollen declines as the grass pollens escalate. "This high tree count, the moderate grass, mold and even rising weed counts are creating a quadruple threat to allergy sufferers," said Dr. Leija. "Patients aren't even bothering to make an appointment - they just show up in the office, sniffing, sneezing and rubbing their eyes in pure misery."

Dr. Leija's Top Tips for Easy Breathing:

- Rinse your nose. "Use saline solution to rinse the inner nostrils to remove trapped particles."
- Limit outdoor exposure. "Trees are outside, not inside. Stay indoors to minimize exposure."
- Close windows. "Resist the lure of fresh spring air and protect the quality of your indoor air."
- Run the air conditioner. "Air conditioners dehumidify air and also act as a filter to trap particles."
- Wash your hair. "Hair traps pollen and allergens and brings them close to the nose; wash your hair after being outdoors to get rid of noxious allergens."
- Change clothes. "Leave your shoes and bags outside the home, and change your clothes after being outdoors and place them in a resealable bag."

Provided by Loyola University Health System

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