Editorial



Examining Ocular Allergy, Quality of Life

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EDITORIAL NOTE

Ocular allergy is an inflammatory reaction of the surface of the eye to particles (allergens) in the environment. It is quite common and affects people of all ages. Inflammation can be asymptomatic, or cause dramatic symptoms, and in severe cases, severe loss of vision. Also called allergic conjunctivitis or ocular allergy, eye allergy occurs when something you are allergic to irritates the conjunctiva. This is the delicate membrane covering the eye and the inside of the eyelid. Like all allergies, allergic conjunctivitis starts when the immune system identifies an otherwise harmless substance as an allergen. This causes your immune system to overreact and produce antibodies called Immunoglobulin (IgE). These antibodies travel to cells that release chemicals which cause an allergic reaction. In this case, allergic reactions include eyes that water, itch, hurt or become red or swollen.

Patients responding to a survey conducted by Ora Inc communicated general dissatisfaction with the efficacy of their eye drops. Specifically, they said they believe that their eye drops are effective only some of the time or not at all. The 64 respondents had participated in an ocular allergy clinical trial and were part of its database. They were asked to respond to a questionnaire to assess the degree to which ocular allergies affect their quality of life, said Emily Schoemmell, manager, allergy, at Ora, Inc. Survey participants, with a mean age of 50.4 years and of whom 70% were women, were residents of Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New York, and Florida. Of the total number of patients, 70% were women; 74%, Caucasian; 20%, Hispanic/Latino; and 6%, Black. According to Schoemmell, almost 98% of respondents had nasal and ocular allergy symptoms, and smaller percentages reported experiencing other types of allergies, such as related to food (17%), skin (30%), and drug(10%).

The group's reported symptoms are representative of national trends, Schoemmell said. She noted that 50% and 47% of patients experience nasal and ocular allergies, respectively, all year. When broken down by season, 48% of patients have nasal (35%) and ocular (48%) symptoms in the spring compared with 0% and 2%, respectively, in the winter. "For most patients, allergies are triggered by either pollen or dust mites," she said. When asked to rank their top 3 complaints associated with ocular allergy, participants listed ocular itching (60%), excessive tearing or watery eyes (27%), and ocular redness (18%). When patients were asked to rate the impact on daily activities using a scale of 0 (no problem) to 6 (extremely bothersome), many gave scores of 5 or 6. "The inability to perform outdoor activities was the top complaint," she said. Almost threequarters of patients reported never seeking treatment from their physicians. Most used OTC drops for nasal and ocular allergies and judged the products to be effective some or none of the time.

The questionnaire also collected data on dry eye, for which 41% of the survey respondents reported symptoms. According to Schoemmell, over the various periods the survey was conducted nationwide during the past 6 years, most patients said that eye drops are effective only some of the time or not at all for treating their allergy symptoms. Indoor allergens such as dust mites and pet dander can also cause eye allergies year-round. If you suffer from this type of allergy, you may notice your symptoms worsen during certain activities such as cleaning your house or grooming a pet. Eye allergy symptoms can be very annoying. Yet they pose little threat to eyesight other than temporary blurriness. Unlike conditions such as pink eye, allergic conjunctivitis is not contagious. However, red, itchy, burning and puffy eyes can be caused also by infections and other conditions that can threaten eyesight.

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