

On seasonal allergies

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A monster lurks among us. Our most ancient enemy, it lies in wait for the right moment to pounce on its carefully selected prey. It strikes before they can even react and then disappears as swiftly as it attacks, only to lie low again until we forget all about it and lower our guards once more. I am, of course, talking about seasonal allergies. The Beast, stealthy as it is, is not hard to spot once it has launched its attack: people begin sneezing and rubbing their eyes, paper tissues are suddenly on high demand, people constantly complain about the sudden changes in temperature; and this all happens in what is supposed to be the most beautiful season of the year, offering a palette of colours, outdoor activities and –alleged– happiness: spring. The Beast hides in pollen, dust, and even the wind. Some lucky few never get to notice its existence, they are never selected as one of its victims, and are thus impervious to it; the rest of us –the ones it does pick– are marked forever and forced to carry this burden for eternity. Human kind has been trying to defend itself against this invisible monster for centuries and, though we have not been very successful in this endeavour, we are still determined to defeat it one day.

There is no telling when or even if the Beast is going to select you as one of its victims; there is only one thing that we know for certain: once it has marked you as its prey, it will never stop its hunt. The Beast is very unpredictable when choosing its prey: some people have had a life-long relationship with it, having been chosen in childhood; others have led carefree lives up until their mid-thirties, when they started experiencing the burden of the hunt; there are even stories of people who were thought to be part of the lucky few –those unafflicted by the reproductive cycle of plants– only to begin sneezing copiously on the spring before their passing. No matter when you get it, you can be certain that, after the first attack, your body will forever be ready to initiate warfare inside your nose anytime the smallest particle of pollen enters your system; or turn your eyes into reddish fountains whenever the temperature rises or drops suddenly.

When attacked, the victim's body activates each and everyone of the defence mechanisms it has, to minimum levels of success. The eyes –in a vain attempt at washing the Beast off– become red with irritation and begin tearing profusely so that the mundane task of seeing becomes an endeavour. The nose also tries to shield the body from harmless pollen particles and sudden temperature changes. In such a valiant attempt, it only manages to annoy the victims and impede them from breathing properly by being clogged up with a transparent mucus which is incapable of stopping the sneezer and only serves the purpose of provoking a tingling sensation at the nostrils when it runs through them. But worst and most useless of all is the itching. That horrible sensation that afflicts the eyelids, the nasal cavity and the throat with no other purpose than to cause the sufferer great inconvenience and prevent them from forgetting about the curse they carry with them. The latter task feels rather unnecessary, as the people around you are able to fulfil it to perfection.

The reddish eyes and runny nose act like a natural repellent for every person on the planet who does not wish to catch the sufferer's malady. People will go out of their way to avoid sharing anything with the Beast's victims, to the extent of not talking directly to their faces so that they do not get within breathing distance of the non-existing virus. Explaining that what you are afflicted with is not contagious has also proven widely ineffective: unfortunately, many people claim to have been assaulted by the Beast after catching a cold or getting the flu, causing the general population to be wary of those of us

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who actually do suffer from seasonal allergies and still prefer not to get near us even after we have told them about it. The fact that these symptoms are close to impossible to hide makes this aspect of the Beast's attack even fiercer.

We have been trying to defend ourselves from seasonal allergies for centuries, and even now there is not much one can do to alleviate the burden of being hunted by the Beast, or rather, there are not many effective strategies to fight back. Regularly taking vitamin C will help you to better cope with the monster lying in wait to attack you, as the symptoms will not be as extreme, but they will not be stopped. Antihistamines may help you fly under the Beast's radar for a couple of hours, but the blessing of not having reddish eyes, a runny nose or an itchy throat cannot last forever, and the monster will always find a way to get back at you. Other defence mechanisms like staying inside or wearing a face mask when going out are not only rather ineffective, but also of little help in your case of "I swear I'm not sick, it's only an allergy". On the flip side, the fact that we have even developed those weapons goes to show how our stubbornness as a species can make us go a long way. We may not be at the point of being able to win this battle yet, but rest assured that we will eventually be.

Seasonal allergies will forever be an enemy of humankind, attacking and trying to divide us every year. They are indiscreet and unrelenting in their attacks. The monster lurks, lying in wait for the right moment to strike. It hides in the most unexpected places: trees, flowers, and heat waves in mid-winter. It has been selecting and marking its prey since the beginning of time, generating an ever growing number of sufferers and separating the unlucky chosen ones from the rest of the pack. Anyone can tell when someone has been marked by the Beast: their eyes become chronically red and watery; their skin dry, itchy and constantly irritated; and –most prominent of all– they wear a permanent clownish red nose, the result of non-stopping yet harmless sneezing. There are few weapons to defend ourselves from the Beast's attack. Alas, its victims must power through it and cope with being treated like biohazards by their peers who do not understand that the sneezing and coughing are insufferable though not contagious. The monster will never give up on its hunt, but we ought to show it how wrong it was when it chose the most stubborn, resilient species on Earth as its prey. The more it tries to separate us from each other, the closer we will get; the more it attacks us, the more we will work on better weapons to fight back. Humans have a history of not giving up easily and this is not the exception: The Beast had lost this battle even before it started.