

Inspire

Monthly newsletter | April 2021

Ideas to
inspire better
health.

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Managing allergy symptoms during a pandemic.

By Dr. Rhonda Low, Family Physician, TELUS Health Care Centres

If you're not feeling one hundred percent these days, you may suspect your seasonal allergies are flaring up. But in the midst of a pandemic, your symptoms might also provoke worry that they're a sign of something more serious. So how can you tell the difference?

Those who are affected by seasonal allergies on an annual basis know they can present in some high-profile ways: there's nasal congestion, runny nose, sneezing and coughing, along with the further misery of red, watery, itchy eyes and an itchy nose. Some sufferers experience headaches, sinus pain and general fatigue, too.

But the COVID-19 pandemic adds a layer of complexity to this year's allergy season.

COVID-19 symptoms can include nasal congestion with a loss of taste or smell, a sore throat, eye irritation, dry cough, fatigue and headache. Its symptoms can also be mild and can be mistaken for the onset of seasonal allergies. The implications can be enormous if one unwittingly has COVID-19 and spreads the potentially deadly infection to family, friends, co-workers and community members. So be suspicious and be cautious: if you have any new respiratory symptoms, or any variation from your usual allergic symptoms, you must self-isolate, get tested for COVID-19, and follow your public health department's guidelines.

Even if you're a seasonal allergy sufferer, contact your primary care provider or start a [virtual consult](#) to discuss your symptoms as soon as you notice them.



Understanding allergy season.

Allergy symptoms can last for weeks or even months, depending on where you live in Canada. Trees such as birch and alder are usually done with their pollen-fest by late spring, but then come the grasses and weeds, which start causing problems for allergy sufferers in spring and continue to do so through summer. If you're allergic to both trees and grass, your allergy season could last as long as six months.

Finding relief.

When it comes to treating seasonal allergies, the most effective medications depend on your symptoms. You can obtain over-the-counter or prescription eye drops for itchy eyes, and prescription steroid nasal sprays for nasal congestion. When taken in combination with non-sedating antihistamines, these treatments can offer good relief. Allergy shots, also called desensitization immunotherapy, can be administered annually for a few weeks just before your pollen season, and may help your immune system become more resistant to particular triggers to lessen your symptoms and need for medication. Daily rinsing of your nose with saline water can also help reduce your allergic symptoms.

If your symptoms are interfering with your life, consult your primary care provider for personalized recommendations based on your medical profile.

Timing is everything.

The trick is to start treating your allergies just before your expected annual flare-up, or at the start of your symptoms. Many people prefer to wait until they're really suffering before resorting to taking medications, but by then, the allergic reaction has taken hold, often requiring a longer duration for any treatment to be effective. Allergies can also trigger mild asthma, which is another reason to begin treatment early.

Reading the weather.

Weather can affect the amount of pollen and mold spores in the air. Allergy symptoms are often better on rainy, cloudy days - while hot, dry and windy weather can make allergy symptoms worse. Driving with the windows closed in your car, avoiding outdoor exercise and staying indoors with closed windows on days with high pollen counts may help.

You can also find the daily pollen counts in your area by checking the pollen forecast on The Weather Network, which collects daily data from tree, grass and pollen samples across Canada.

The best way to proactively treat your seasonal allergies is to work with a trusted care provider to develop a plan that's specific to your symptoms and your lifestyle.

[Learn more about our personalized care services](#)



Three things employers should know about COVID-19 vaccination at work.

By Dr. Farrell Cahill, Occupational Health and Safety Scientist, TELUS Health Care Centres

With COVID-19 vaccination plans rolling out across Canada, a critical workplace question remains: Can employers mandate that employees be vaccinated?

Currently, the answer to this question seems to be both yes and no. Under the Occupational Health and Safety Act, employers are required to protect their workers, but there will always be exceptions when an employee has a sincere human rights claim such as a medical condition. On the other hand, there will be cases (for instance, in settings where employees must interact with vulnerable populations) where the risk of COVID-19 vaccine refusal may be too great, and an employer may be within their right to dismiss an employee without cause.

Employers throughout the country are going to be faced with the difficult task of balancing their duty to provide a safe work environment and their duty to heed human rights issues.

For all employers - even those in traditionally low-risk environments - workplace safety now entails mitigating the risk of COVID-19 transmission. Provincial and federal policies are changing rapidly, but here are 3 things all employers should know about COVID-19 vaccination at work:

1. It's more important than ever to obtain professional medical oversight.

It's more important than ever for organizations to have a Chief/Regional Medical Officer (CMO/RMO), also known as an Occupation Health (OH) Physician, who can provide occupation-specific medical and health service support to employers. A medical officer helps organizations navigate regulatory standards and best practices, and helps employers meet their federal and/or provincial obligations to their workforce. Especially today, this level of medical oversight can ensure organizations have the most up-to-date support, medical knowledge, surveillance, protocols, and programs to face the daily occupational challenges that will continue to arise during a global pandemic. TELUS Health Care Centres specializes in providing medical oversight to workforces nationwide.

2. Employment policies and accommodation programs need to be updated.

Employers may encounter employees who wish to forgo COVID-19 vaccination, which may be their human right. But in order to accommodate such wishes while still upholding the Occupational Health and Safety Act, new policies and programs may need to be enacted in many workplaces. For example, it could be designated that all "essential workers" must be vaccinated for COVID-19, but if an employer has not clearly defined this designation, it may be unable to act. Employers considering the implementation of a vaccination policy should:

- Determine the occupations most at risk to COVID-19 and outline how the vaccination would help to mitigate that risk
- Outline the potential accommodations that could be offered by the organization as an alternative to a COVID-19 vaccination, while highlighting those occupations which are and are not applicable
- Ensure that any and all changes to the employment policy have been reviewed by a legal and medical service provider
- Outline clearly how the changes to the employment policy will be communicated to the workforce regarding the requirements for COVID-19 vaccination and the consequence of non-compliance
- Determine how to enact the employment policy procedures consistently as they relate to COVID-19 vaccination
- Ensure that accommodation and/or employment assistant programs have been updated to reflect the changes as they relate to COVID-19

3. COVID-19 screening and testing programs will remain essential for many workplaces.

COVID-19 screening and testing programs will continue to be essential for many Canadian employers for the foreseeable future. Even if a legal obligation for COVID-19 vaccination is enacted federally or provincially for certain vulnerable occupations, enforcement will take time. If a screening and testing program is not currently in place or planned for in your return-to-work strategy, consider working with an occupational health specialist to develop one.

Learn more about our occupational health services

Please note that given the rapid modifications to federal and provincial legislation surrounding COVID-19, this information is subject to change and these facts should be validated with your occupational health and safety service provider(s) and [Health Canada](https://www.healthcanada.ca).

Spring salad with avocado dill dressing.



Prep time: 20 minutes | Makes 4 servings

Lighten up lunchtime with this satisfying chickpea and veggie spring salad with avocado dill dressing. It's nutrient-dense, packed with bright flavours, and the creamy dressing is so delicious, you may just want to double the recipe.

Ingredients

For the dressing:

- ¼ cup extra virgin olive oil.
- 2 Tbsp. lemon juice.
- 2 Tbsp. grainy old fashioned mustard.
- 1 green onion, chopped.
- ¼ ripe avocado.
- 1 Tbsp. chopped fresh dill.
- ½ Tbsp. minced garlic.

Nutritional information per serving:

256 calories, 21g carbohydrates, 6g sugar, 6g fibre, 6g protein, 18g fat (2g saturated, 16g unsaturated).

For the salad:

- 1 can chickpeas, rinsed and drained.
- 1 bell pepper, chopped.
- 1 cup grape tomatoes, sliced in half.
- 1 cup cucumber, chopped.
- 3 green onions, diced.

Method

1. Combine all dressing ingredients in a high-speed blender. Blend until smooth.
2. While dressing is blending, combine salad ingredients in a large bowl.
3. Pour dressing over salad and toss to combine. Top with fresh dill for garnish.

[Learn more about our nutrition services](#)



Epigenetics: How our genes and experiences make us who we are.

Dr. Diane McIntosh, Chief Neuroscience Officer, TELUS

Mental illnesses are caused by biological risk factors (like genetics and hormones), psychological factors (like coping skills and temperament) and social factors (like financial and relationship issues, both of which may be heightened during the COVID-19 pandemic). No single risk factor is responsible for the onset of a mental illness; several risk factors often come together to create a cumulative risk.

One example of cumulative risk is when our unique genetic profile is influenced by our environment, which is referred to as epigenetics. In order to really understand epigenetics, it's necessary to have some background information about what genes are and how they work.

The basics of DNA and epigenetics.

Humans are made with built-in instructions books called deoxyribonucleic acid, or DNA, which is found in the nucleus of every cell in your body. Your DNA contains your genetic code, which provides the instructions necessary for life, including how we grow, develop and reproduce.

I think of DNA as being like a piano keyboard. Every person has their own unique keyboard (except identical twins – they have identical keyboards). Each key on your keyboard represents a section of DNA, known as a gene. Genes hold the information needed for cells to differentiate into unique types: when specific genes are turned on (expressed) or turned off (suppressed), they direct what a cell will become.

DNA is surprisingly simple – it's made up of just four chemicals. Genes are short sequences of those four chemicals, which direct a cell to produce a specific protein (like insulin), determine our physical traits (like eye colour) and direct cells to differentiate, for instance, becoming heart muscle cells, brain cells or liver cells.

If our DNA is like a piano keyboard, the way the keys are played (the way genes are expressed) makes you who you are. Some keys are not played at all and others are always played. Some are played softly, while others are played loudly. If, when and how your genes are expressed ultimately makes you the unique individual you are.

Think of it as “the music of you.”

DNA doesn't change, but gene expression does.

While DNA can't be changed, how our genes are expressed does change at different times during our growth and development – thus we change our tune throughout our life. The process underlying this is called epigenetics, which is the science of gene expression. It involves the interaction between nature (the genes you inherit from your parents) and nurture (your life experiences). How your genes are expressed depends on the type of genes you inherit from your parents, your developmental stage (puberty, pregnancy or menopause, for example) and your environment.

Epigenetics and mental illness.

Epigenetic changes can be part of normal development – or associated with illness. The changes that occur during puberty are a good example of a normal epigenetic cascade. At puberty, some genes are expressed and others are suppressed, causing males and females to develop different “secondary” sexual characteristics (for example, women develop breasts and men develop deeper voices).

Of course, this is a very complicated process involving hormones and other brain chemicals, but it's all laid out in our instruction booklet – our DNA – and the genes that our DNA is comprised of.

We now know that our inherited genetic code can be influenced by life events (referred to as our environment), which can alter how our genes are expressed. For instance, the timing of puberty and menopause is influenced by inherited biological factors as well as by our environment. Some toxins and infectious diseases are now known to cause epigenetic changes. For instance, we know that toxins found in cigarette smoke are associated with many types of cancer by triggering the expression of cancer-causing genes or suppressing genes that protect against cancer.

Research on schizophrenia provides other examples of gene-environmental interactions that may trigger the development of the illness. Examples of environmental triggers that can provoke epigenetic changes, potentially contributing to the development of schizophrenia, include infections during pregnancy, abnormal bowel flora (microorganisms that live in the gut) and smoking cannabis that contains high-potency THC.^{1,2} These, and likely other environmental exposures, are of greatest concern to vulnerable individuals, like those who have a family history of serious mental illness. Those families likely have specific genes in their DNA that heightens their risk for a mental illness and, with exposure to a provocative environmental agent, a gene that promotes schizophrenia or another mental illness might be activated, resulting in the onset of symptoms.

To learn more about your family history's role in your physical or mental health, consider booking a [preventive health assessment](#).

**Explore our mental
health services**

1. Smith, A., Kaufman, F., Sandy, M.S. et al. Cannabis Exposure During Critical Windows of Development: Epigenetic and Molecular Pathways Implicated in Neuropsychiatric Disease. *Curr Envir Health Rpt* 7, 325–342 (2020). <https://doi-org.ezproxy.library.ubc.ca/10.1007/s40572-020-00275-4> 2. Khavari, B.; Cairns, M.J. Epigenomic Dysregulation in Schizophrenia: In Search of Disease Etiology and Biomarkers. *Cells* 2020, 9, 1837. <https://doi.org/10.3390/cells9081837>

What's happening: Programs and events to nurture wellbeing.



Webinar | Ready, set, run!



Complimentary

Register

With temperatures rising, are you thinking about starting a running program or fine-tuning your current one?

Join TELUS Health Care Centres kinesiologist and exercise physiologist Melanie Portal for a one-hour webinar dedicated to debunking common running myths and sharing practical considerations for running smarter, not harder. Topics include injury prevention, gear selection, program building ideas and more.

Thursday, April 22, 2021

12:00 pm to 1:00 pm PT

1:00 pm to 2:00 pm MT

3:00 pm to 4:00 pm ET

E-challenge | 4 weeks to better mental wellness.



Complimentary

Register

Prolonged stress and worry have become commonplace for many Canadians. But with small, consistent changes to your daily routine, you can strengthen your mindset and wellbeing in big ways.

We invite you to join our **4 weeks to better mental wellness** challenge to cultivate better mental health right now — no matter your circumstances.

Date: Available now.

Webinar | Advance care planning in British Columbia.



Complimentary

Register

Often overlooked, advance care planning allows your loved ones to uphold your wishes if you become incapacitated and unable to use your own voice.

In this one-hour webinar, TELUS Health Care Centres registered social worker Miriam Maxcy (RSW, MSW) shares an advance care planning toolkit for British Columbia residents, including an overview of provincial legislation, key terminology and important resources.

Tuesday, May 4, 2021

5:30 pm to 6:30 pm PT / 6:30 pm to 7:30 pm MT

8:30 pm to 9:30 pm ET

Mindfulness and meditation for beginners.



Cost: \$200.00 plus tax per person

Learn more or register

Mindfulness teaches us how to focus our attention on the present moment and observe, without judgement, what is taking place in our minds and our bodies. Led by registered dietitian and mindfulness coach Heather Feldmann, this 4-week virtual program covers various breath and mindfulness meditation exercises. Practicing mindfulness techniques daily can help you:

- Improve focus and concentration
- Build healthy stress management skills
- Enhance empathy and compassion

Tuesdays - May 11 to June 1, 2021

5:30 pm to 6:30 pm PT/ 6:30 pm to 7:30 pm MT

8:30 pm to 9:30 pm ET

Virtual service | Ergonomic assessment.



Cost: \$275 (plus tax)

Learn more or book an assessment

A poorly designed workstation can lead to frustration, pain and fatigue. Our kinesiologists can help you make simple adjustments to optimize your workspace and help prevent the onset or development of acute or chronic conditions. The one-hour virtual assessment includes:

- A comprehensive ergonomic assessment of your workstation
- Expert advice to improve your setup using household items
- A customized exercise and stretching program to treat and prevent pain or discomfort
- Posture checklist
- Personalized report including assessment results and recommendations



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