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Ready for Spring Allergies?

Most people aren't prepared to manage symptoms that come with a high pollen count, allergists say.

Spring routinely spells misery for allergy sufferers, but a recent survey reveals that most patients don't try to manage their symptoms until it's too late. The survey asked more than 1,000 adults with seasonal allergies and more than 500 parents of children with seasonal allergies how they prepared for the high pollen counts that come with warmer weather. The survey found that three out of four only thought about managing symptoms once they were experiencing those symptoms or when allergy season had already started. Also, more than half did not know what prescriptions were available to ease their allergy symptoms, while roughly a third did not know their allergy triggers or how to ease symptoms. And less than half of adults surveyed visited a doctor for advice or got a prescription for an allergy treatment before allergy season began. The survey was conducted by the Asthma and Allergy Foundation of America and drug maker Merck & Co.

"Not thinking about allergies until symptoms occur is inviting misery," said Dr. Rita Kachru, an allergist at UCLA Medical Center. "Once triggered, you are playing catch-up," she explained. So what can you do? Start by closing the windows in your home and staying indoors on high pollen count days, Kachru said. If you have to go outside and breathe in all those allergens, nasal gargling can help, Kachru added. This decreases exposure to the allergen before it binds to the nasal mucus and triggers the inflammatory response, she explained. To perform nasal gargling, buy an irrigation bottle, available at drug stores and online. Fill it with 8 ounces of distilled or boiled water that's been brought to room temperature. Add a half teaspoon of salt and a quarter teaspoon of baking soda. Halve the recipe for children, Kachru said. Sniff up the water from the tip of the bottle; 4 ounces per nostril for adults, half that for children. Never use unboiled tap water, she said.

"Tap has a certain amount of bacteria that is not good up the nose," Kachru explained. But, nasal gargling usually doesn't appeal to small children, said Dr. Vivian Hernandez-Trujillo, section chief of allergy and immunology for Nicklaus Children's Hospital in Miami. Older children may balk too, she said. For them she prefers the neti pot to nasal gargling. A neti pot is a slightly different device from an irrigation bottle, although both are meant to help clear nasal passages. If children won't use either method, Hernandez-Trujillo recommends avoidance of allergens if possible. Otherwise, medications such as oral antihistamines, intranasal steroids and intranasal antihistamines can help, she said. "Before using anything, however, it's crucial to identify if the symptoms are due to allergies," Hernandez-Trujillo said.

It's best to get tested: Some parents think their child has allergies and it turns out to be a sinus infection. Talk to your primary care doctor or your pediatrician before using medication, she said, and ask about testing.
Allergy shots, or immunotherapy, are another option, Kachru said. The course of treatment, with a small amount of the allergen injected to desensitize, is about three to five years. "The longer you do it, the better," she said. "Eighty-five percent of people who undergo allergy immunotherapy will be asymptomatic and have that last for eight to 10 years." Testing for allergies, done with either skin or blood tests, is generally covered by most health insurance plans, Kachru said.

By Kathleen Doheny | HealthDay News Reporter



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ANSWER THE CALL ABOUT DIABETES

We're here to help, every step of the way.

Your APWU Health Plan offers you a Diabetes Management Program with Cigna to help you get healthy and live well. Through this program, a health advocate is available to help you manage your diabetes. To do that, sometimes a health advocate may call you at home.

Why should I answer the call?

Cigna is here to help you. A health advocate may call to start a conversation to learn what's most important to you, such as managing diabetes or making healthy choices. But a caring professional can't help if you don't answer the phone.

Every phone call is private, confidential and at no additional cost. It's important to know that help is available 24/7/365, and getting care will not impact your employment. On every call, a health advocate will use real language (not insurance jargon). The program will never try to sell you anything. The call is all about helping you live a healthier life.

Your health advocate will help you:

- Create a personal care plan
- Understand medications or doctor's orders
- Identify triggers that affect your condition
- Learn your treatment options
- Know what to expect if you need to spend time in the hospital

Health advocates are trained:

- Nurses
- Behavioral specialists
- Health educators
- Exercise specialists
- Nutritionists

All health advocates are supported by doctors and pharmacists.

Do I have to wait for you to call me?

No. You can call us anytime, day or night at **800.582.1314.** We're here 24/7/365 to serve you, but we only do coaching calls during working hours. If you call late at night or early in the morning, we'll help you schedule a call with your health advocate. Just make sure your contact information is up to date.

Hemoglobin A1c (HbA1c) Test for Diabetes

The hemoglobin A1c test tells you your average level of blood sugar over the past 2 to 3 months. It's also called HbA1c, glycated hemoglobin test, and glycohemoglobin. People who have diabetes need this test regularly to see if their levels are staying within range. It can tell if you need to adjust your diabetes medicines. The A1c test is also used to diagnose diabetes.

What Is Hemoglobin?

Hemoglobin is a protein found in red blood cells. It gives blood its red color, and its job is to carry oxygen throughout your body.

How the Test Works

The sugar in your blood is called glucose. When glucose builds up in your blood, it binds to the hemoglobin in your red blood cells. The A1c test measures how much glucose is found. Red blood cells live for about 3 months, so the test shows the average level of glucose in your blood for the past 3 months. If your glucose levels have been high over recent weeks, your hemoglobin A1c test will be higher.

What's a Normal Hemoglobin A1c Test?

For people without diabetes, the normal range for the hemoglobin A1c level is between 4% and 5.6%. Hemoglobin A1c levels between 5.7% and 6.4% mean you have a higher chance of getting diabetes. Levels of 6.5% or higher mean you have diabetes.

Setting Goals for A1c Levels

The target A1c level for people with diabetes is usually less than 7%. The higher the hemoglobin A1c, the higher your risk of having complications related to diabetes.

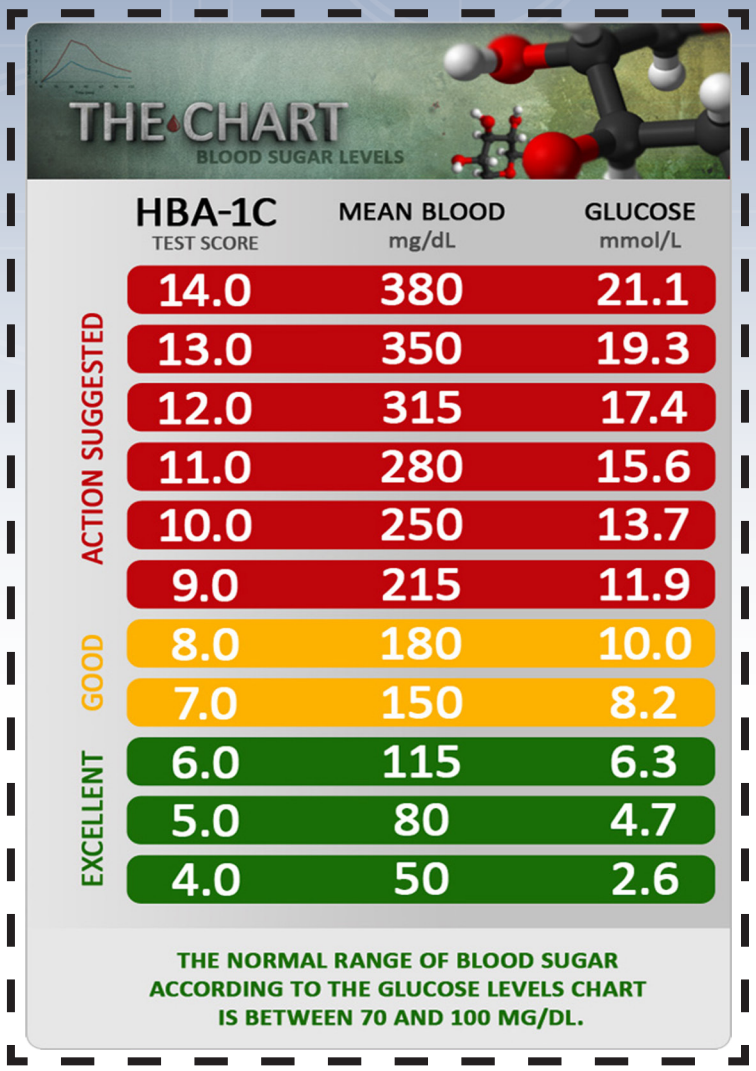
A combination of diet, exercise, and medication can bring your levels down.

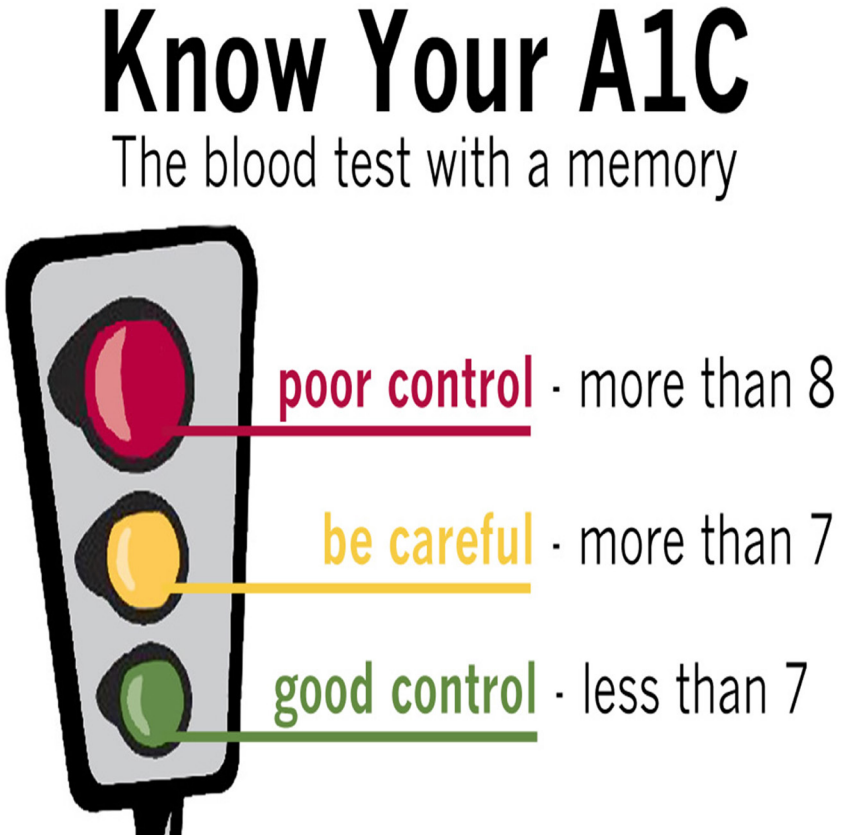
People with diabetes should have an A1c test every 3 months to make sure their blood sugar is in their target range. If your diabetes is under good control, you may be able to wait longer between the blood tests. But experts recommend checking at least two times a year.

People with diseases affecting hemoglobin, such as anemia, may get misleading results with this test. Other things that can affect the results of the hemoglobin A1c include supplements such as vitamins C and E and high cholesterol levels. Kidney disease and liver disease may also affect the test.

WebMD Medical Reference Reviewed by Michael Dansinger, MD on October 26, 2016

Your Diabetes Score Card





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Recognizing the Benefit of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services



Beacon Health Options is the nation's largest independent behavioral health care company, and offers integrated behavioral health care services, prevention, mental health and substance abuse assistance. Your health plan recognizes the benefit of mental health and substance abuse services, which can help members deal with problems related to stress to anxiety and depression.

From learning how to cope with a chronic condition, to family challenges like adoption and caregiving, to help with substance abuse and more, our behavioral health partner Beacon Health Options can offer assistance and steer you toward qualified participating service providers in your area.

Call Beacon Health Options at 1-888-700-7965, and they will assist you in identifying the closest hospital in your network that is most suited to your needs.

Visit Beacon Health Options at https://www.achievesolutions.net/achievesolutions/en/APWU/Home.do.

In-Network services include:

- Office visits: $20 copayment
- In-patient professional services: 10% of plan allowance (preauthorization required)
- Outpatient and diagnostic testing: 10% of plan allowance (preauthorization required for some services)
- Check your APWU Health Plan brochure (High Option Section 5 (e); pages 59-60) for specific terms and conditions.