Winter weather plays a role in spring allergies, expert says

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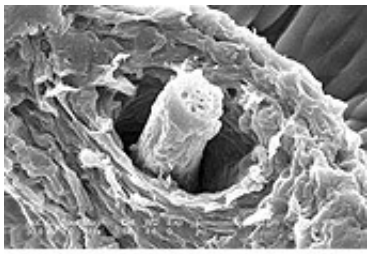

Dandelion pollen, magnified 811x. Source: US Centers for Disease Control & Prevention

Sufferers urged to start taking allergy meds before pollen counts rise to prevent severe reactions.

(HealthDay)—The start of allergy season is overlapping with the cold and flu season in some parts of the United States, leading some people to wonder which ailment they have, an expert says.

"We are already seeing patients coming in with allergy symptoms in Atlanta," allergist Dr. Stanley Fineman, immediate past president of the American College of Allergy, Asthma and Immunology (ACAAI), said in a college news release. "Several people in the Southeast have been confusing their allergy symptoms for cold viruses."

In some regions, trees such as maple, oak, elm and birch begin to pollinate in February, he explained.

Fineman said it's difficult to predict the severity of the spring allergy season. Traditionally, a milder winter leads to a longer spring allergy season due to what's known as the "priming" effect.

"When winter weather turns unexpectedly warm, pollens and molds are released into the air earlier than usual, and then die down when it gets cold again," Fineman said. "This pattern of weather can prime a person's allergic reaction, so when the allergen reappears as the weather gets warm again, allergy symptoms are worse than ever."

People who live in regions where pollen counts have not yet increased should begin taking allergy medications now, according to the ACAAI. It said nearly 50 million Americans suffer from allergies.

More information: The American Academy of Family Physicians has more about hay fever.