

REALLY?

## The Claim: Stress Can Make Allergies Worse

By [ANAHAD O'CONNOR](#)

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### THE FACTS



Leif Parsons

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This year's allergy season has not been an easy one, with [pollen counts at record highs](#) in several major cities. But for many sufferers, a less stressful life may ease the allergy burden.

In recent years, studies have shown that psychological [stress and anxiety](#)— even at light or moderate levels — can worsen allergy symptoms. Scientists suspect that it has something to do with the way stress affects the immune system, causing elevated levels of compounds that heighten the allergic response and remain unaffected by standard treatments for [hay fever](#), like antihistamines.

One of the most [recent and striking studies](#) was published this year by scientists at [Ohio State University](#). On two different days the scientists subjected hay fever sufferers to a series of skin prick tests to measure their responses to allergens, including the size of the wheals they developed. On one day the subjects gave speeches to a panel and then had to solve math questions in their heads. On the other day they had less stressful tasks, like reading magazines.

“Wheal diameters increased after the stressor,” the scientists wrote, “compared to a slight decrease following the control task.”

Even a day after the stressor, the most anxious subjects continued to show severe symptoms, suggesting a lingering response from the anxiety.

### THE BOTTOM LINE

Studies show that psychological stress can heighten and possibly prolong allergic responses.

**ANAHAD O'CONNOR** [scitimes@nytimes.com](mailto:scitimes@nytimes.com)

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