

Hay fever

Hay fever is the common name for a condition called allergic rhinitis, which means an allergy that affects the nose. Most people associate hay fever with spring, when airborne pollens from grasses are at their peak. However, hay fever can occur at any time of the year. This is known as perennial allergic rhinitis, which is usually caused by a reaction to allergens around the home, such as dust mites, moulds or animal hair or fur.

Symptoms of hay fever

Some of the symptoms include:

- Sneezing
- A runny or stuffy nose
- Itchy ears, nose and throat
- Red, itchy or watery eyes
- Headaches.

In some cases, the symptoms of hay fever can be so severe that a person can't sleep or concentrate, and may feel tired or unwell.

Hay fever is an allergic reaction

Your nose acts as a filter. The tiny hairs and mucus that line the nasal passages trap dust, pollens and other microscopic particles. A person with hay fever is allergic to some of the particles that get trapped in the nose, such as pollen.

An allergic reaction means the immune system treats a harmless substance as if it is dangerous, and launches an 'attack'. The nasal passages become inflamed and more mucus is produced.

Reducing hay fever symptoms

Suggestions to prevent or limit symptoms of hay fever include:

- Check the pollen count forecast on television or in the newspaper. Try to stay indoors if it's a high count.
- Stay indoors as much as possible in spring, on windy days or after thunderstorms.
- In your garden, choose plants that are pollinated by birds or insects, rather than plants that release their seeds into the air.
- Replace your lawn with bricked or paved areas.
- Smear petroleum jelly (like Vaseline) inside your nose to stop the pollen from touching the lining of your nose.
- Splash your eyes often with cold water to flush out any pollen.
- Reduce your exposure to dust and dust mites, animals and animal hair or fur (dander).

Medication can help

If you have hay fever, your body produces a substance called histamine, which leads to inflammation (redness and swelling) in the nose.

Some medications may help the symptoms of hay fever. Ask your doctor or pharmacist for advice. You may be advised to try:

- **Corticosteroid nasal sprays** – these help reduce the inflammation in the nose, which is the cause of nasal blockage and other symptoms. They need to be used regularly as directed to be effective.
- **Anti-histamine medications (non-sedating)** – these may be useful to control sneezing and itching, but are not as effective as sprays to control a severely blocked or runny nose. Ask your doctor or pharmacist for advice if you are breastfeeding, as some medications can cause breastfed babies to become irritable and restless.
- **Eye drops** – may relieve itchy, swollen or runny eyes. Ask your doctor or pharmacist for advice on choosing the correct eye drops.
- **Decongestant nasal sprays** – are useful for quick relief, but should not be used for more than a few days as long-term use can damage the lining of the nose.
- **Immunotherapy** – some people may benefit from immunotherapy, which exposes a person to increasing amounts of an allergen to improve tolerance and reduce symptoms. This therapy may help hay fever and some cases of asthma, but does not help food allergy. It should only be conducted under medical supervision as exposure to allergens can be dangerous and potentially life threatening. Seek advice from your doctor.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Pharmacist

Things to remember

- Hay fever is an allergic reaction to pollen and is common in spring.
- Perennial allergic rhinitis occurs all year round.
- Avoiding your triggers is the best way to reduce the frequency of hay fever attacks.

This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:

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