

Sources: Asthma UK
The British Allergy Foundation
www.prodigy.nhs.uk
www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk

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For more information on hay fever and other allergies,
you can contact:-

Allergy UK, Unit 3, White Oak Square, London Road,
Swanley, Kent. BR8 7AG. Telephone helpline 020 8303 8583.
Or visit their website www.allergyuk.org

Leaflet produced by:-

The Health Shop
CHEC
31 High Street
Madeley
Telford
TF7 5AR

Telephone: 01952 582659

Hay fever



Hay fever is also known as “seasonal allergic rhinitis” and is very common in the UK. It is an allergy to grass or hay pollens and can really reduce the quality of life and can significantly affect you at work, at home and in leisure activities.

You are more likely to develop hay fever if there is a history of allergies in your family, particularly asthma or eczema. It often first develops in the teenage years and peaks in the twenties.

Research shows that many people become less sensitive to pollen as they get older and that it may eventually go away or improve in many cases (often no longer being a problem by mid-forties).

90% of people with hay fever are allergic to grass pollen, the levels of which peak between May and July. However, hay fever can also be caused by other pollens, such as tree pollens (March to May). Some people can get hay fever in the autumn months as well, though this is rarer and is usually caused by weeds such as nettles and docks, late flowering plants and fungal spores.

See your GP if you think you have hay fever. S/he will usually be able to diagnose you from a description of your symptoms, especially if you are able to tell her/him what time of day or year symptoms occur.

Hay fever is normally obvious from the symptoms, but in a few cases you may have to have a skin or blood test to work out exactly what you're allergic to. This may be done if you have hay fever symptoms all year round, which could be caused by other substances as well as pollen, such as house dust-mites, furry or feathered animals or some foods.

Exam time

Exam time usually coincides with the hay fever season. If you're getting ready to sit an exam it's important to get your hay fever symptoms under control as early as possible. This may mean seeing your doctor well in advance to make sure you've got the right treatment.

Once your hay fever is under control you'll find yourself sleeping better at night. This means you'll feel much fresher and be able to concentrate much harder on your revision as well as on the day of the exam.

Holidays

Go somewhere which has low a pollen count all year round. For example, there is generally less pollen around in coastal areas where the breeze blows fresh air in off the sea.

Mountain regions and moor land tend to contain fewer pollen-producing plants and can be kinder on your hay fever.

Try visiting places outside their peak pollen season. For example, the grass pollen season in Mediterranean regions starts and finishes about five weeks earlier than in northern Europe. This means that by mid-July the pollen count in popular holiday destinations like southern Spain, France, Italy, Greece and the Mediterranean islands is usually well past its peak.

Grass pollen is at its most abundant in Florida between April and October. In the Caribbean it's a problem in June, July and from October to March.

Treatment

As with most allergies, the best way to control them is by avoiding the trigger substance. However, it would be nearly impossible to avoid pollen, particularly during the summertime when you want to spend time outdoors.

Fortunately, there is a range of products available to treat the symptoms of hay fever. To decide what is best for you, it is best to speak to your GP. This is particularly important if you have asthma as well because hay fever can often make asthma symptoms worse.

Antihistamine nose sprays – a dose from an antihistamine nose spray can rapidly ease itching, sneezing and watering (within 15 minutes or so). It may not be so good at easing congestion. Antihistamines work by blocking the action of histamine. This is one of the chemicals involved in allergic reactions.

Antihistamine tablets (or liquid medicines) – antihistamines taken by mouth are an alternative. They ease most of the symptoms but may not be so good at relieving nasal congestion (blocked nose). A dose usually works within an hour.

Steroid nose sprays – these usually work well to clear the nasal symptoms (itching, sneezing, watering and congestion). They work by reducing inflammation in the nose. It can take several days for a steroid nose spray to build up to its full effect, therefore, you will not have an immediate relief of symptoms when you first start it.

Eye drops – if necessary, you can use eye drops in addition to other treatments.

Symptoms

Hay fever symptoms can be similar to those of a cold and are due to the body's immune system reacting to the pollen. When pollen comes into contact with the cells that line the mouth, nose, eyes and throat, it irritates them, triggering the release of chemical called histamine. This produces symptoms of an allergic reaction.

Symptoms can vary in severity and some people find their symptoms are worse some years than others.

Common symptoms – can be a runny and itchy nose or stuffy blocked nose, sneezing, itchy and watery red eyes, itchy ears and a dry, itchy throat or mouth. In some cases only the nasal symptoms occur, and in some cases only the eye symptoms occur. Disturbed sleep, inability to concentrate, listlessness and depression are also reported symptoms of hay fever.

Less common symptoms – loss of smell, face pain (caused by blocked sinuses), sweats and headaches.

Asthma symptoms – such as wheezing and breathlessness may get worse if you already have asthma. Some people have asthma symptoms only during the hay fever season.

Symptoms can also be worse if the pollen count is high. The pollen count is the number of pollen grains found in each cubic metre of air. This isn't determined simply by how many flowers are around, but also by the weather. The amount of sunshine, rain or wind there is affects how much pollen plants release.

During the pollen season, plants release pollen early in the morning. On a sunny day, as the day gets warmer and more flowers open, pollen levels may rise and the pollen is carried high up into the air. The pollen count is therefore highest in the early evening, and it's a good idea to avoid going outdoors at this time.

On humid and windy days, pollen spreads easily. On rainy days, pollen may be cleared from the air causing levels to fall. The pollen count is often given with TV, radio, internet, or newspaper weather forecasts.

The following may help when the pollen count is high:-

- Stay indoors as much as possible and keep windows and doors shut
- Avoid playing or walking in large grassy places, camping and cutting grass
- Avoid line-drying clothes and bedding when pollen counts are high. If you do dry your washing outdoors, give the items a good shake before bringing them back into the house
- Shower and wash your hair after being outdoors, especially after going to the countryside
- Wear wrap-around sunglasses when you are out to stop pollen getting in your eyes
- Try not to rub itchy eyes, splash your eyes with cold water regularly. This will help flush out any pollen and help soothe and cool your eyes
- Using gel nasal sprays can be helpful as they act as a barrier to trap pollens
- Choose hypo-allergenic eye make-up, especially mascara
- If you don't already have a pet, think carefully before getting one
- If you do already have a family pet, don't let it get close to your face as they can carry pollen in their fur. If possible, brush them outdoors and keep them out of the lounge and bedroom

- Use goggles when swimming, whether in the sea or in a pool
- Keep car windows closed and consider buying a pollen filter for the air vents in your car
- Keep fresh flowers out of the house and vacuum and damp dust regularly
- Don't smoke and stop other people from smoking in your house. Smoking – and breathing in other people's smoke – irritates the lining of your nose, eyes, throat and airways, which can make symptoms worse
- If you enjoy gardening, consider creating a hay fever friendly environment for yourself. Grow insect-pollinated plants like the geranium, iris and clematis. Consider replacing the lawn with attractive paving. Don't grow any new hedges and don't cut existing ones yourself. Do away with the compost heap (which produces mould spores)

Asthma UK produce a leaflet entitled "Low Allergen Gardening", which contains practical advice on how to create a garden that won't drive your hay fever wild! The leaflet can be downloaded from www.asthmauk.org.uk or by telephoning 020 7786 5000

- If you have perennial rhinitis (long term hay fever) and are allergic to house dust-mites, the following tips may help you:
 - Use barrier covers for your bedding
 - Hot wash (at 60°C) all bedding at least once a week