

Hay Fever

Hay fever is caused by an allergy to pollen. Common symptoms are a runny nose, itchy nose, blocked nose, sneezing, and itchy eyes. Treatment usually works well. Common treatments are antihistamine tablets and/or a steroid nose spray.

What is hay fever?

Hay fever (also called seasonal allergic rhinitis) is caused by an allergy to pollens or moulds. Grass pollen is the most common cause (May to July). Less common causes are tree pollens (March to May), and moulds (July to September). Symptoms are due to the immune system 'over-reacting' to the pollen or mould. Cells of the immune system in your nose and eyes release histamine and other chemicals when they come in contact with pollen. This causes inflammation in the nose (rhinitis) and eyes (conjunctivitis).

Who gets hay fever?

At least 1 in 10 people in the UK have hay fever. It usually first develops before the age of 20. Symptoms return for a season each year, but it eventually goes away or improves in many cases. (The condition goes in about 1 in 5 cases, and improves in about half of cases over 5-20 years.)

What are the symptoms of hay fever?

- **Common symptoms** are a runny and itchy nose, blocked nose, sneezing, itchy and watery red eyes, and sore throat. Sometimes only nose symptoms, or only eye symptoms occur.
- **Less common symptoms** are loss of smell, facial pains, sweats, and headache.
- **Asthma symptoms** such as wheeze and breathlessness may get worse if you have asthma. Some people have asthma symptoms *only* during the hay fever season.

Will it help if I avoid pollen?

It is impossible to totally avoid pollen. However, symptoms tend to be less severe if you reduce your exposure to pollen. 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 cutting grass, large grassy places, and camping.
- Shower and wash your hair after being outdoors. In particular, after you go to the countryside.
- Wear wrap-around sunglasses when you are out.
- Bring in washing, and close windows before the evening when pollen falls as the air cools.
- Keep car windows closed, and consider buying a pollen filter for the air vents in your car.

What are the treatment options for hay fever?

Antihistamine tablets or liquid medicines

Antihistamines work by blocking the action of histamine. A dose usually works within an hour or so to ease symptoms. Therefore, they can be taken 'as required' if symptoms are mild, or come and go. You can also take antihistamines regularly if you have symptoms every day.

Antihistamines ease most of the symptoms, but are not so good at clearing a blocked nose (nasal congestion). There are several brands of antihistamines which you can buy at pharmacies or get on prescription. Older brands such as chlorpheniramine (Piriton) work well, but make some people drowsy. Newer brands tend to cause less drowsiness. Ask the pharmacist for advice.

Nose (nasal) sprays

A nose spray is an alternative, or you can use one in addition to antihistamines if symptoms are not fully controlled by either alone.

- **A steroid nose spray** is usually the most effective treatment for all the nose symptoms (itch, sneezing, watering, and blocked nose). It works by reducing inflammation in the nose. It takes several days for a steroid spray to build up its effect. So, you will not have immediate relief of symptoms when you first start it. (It is best to start taking it 1-2 weeks before the hay fever season begins if you know that you have hay fever.) You need to take it each day over the hay fever season to keep symptoms away. There are several brands of steroid nose spray which you can buy at pharmacies, or get on prescription.
- **Other nose sprays** are alternatives, but do not usually work as well as steroid sprays.
 - *Antihistamine* nose sprays rapidly ease itching, sneezing, and watering (within 15 minutes or so). Like antihistamine tablets, they are not so good at relieving a blocked nose. They are useful 'as-required' if a regular steroid spray is not necessary. You can also use one regularly to keep symptoms away. There are different brands.
 - *Sodium cromoglicate* nose spray is an option if you have mild symptoms. Like steroid sprays, it takes a while to build up its effect, and you need to take it regularly. It is thought to work by stopping the release of histamine from certain cells.
 - *Ipratropium bromide* nose spray may be worth a try if you have a very watery nose. However, it does not ease sneezing or a blocked nose.
 - *Decongestant nose sprays* which you can buy at pharmacies are not usually advised for more than a few days. They have an immediate effect to clear a blocked nose. So, one may be useful for a few days to clear a blocked nose when you first use a steroid nose spray. The steroid can then get into the lining of the nose to work. However, if you use a decongestant nose spray for more than 5-7 days, a 'rebound' more severe congestion of your nose may develop.

Eye drops

If necessary, you can use eye drops in addition to other treatments.

- *Antihistamine eye drops* work quickly, so you can use them 'as required' to ease a flare up of eye symptoms. You can also use them regularly if needed. There are several brands.
- '*Mast cell stabilisers*' are another type of eye drop. There are different brands. They are thought to work by stopping the release of histamine from certain cells (mast cells). You need to use them regularly to prevent symptoms.

Treatment for severe symptoms

Rarely, a short course of **steroid tablets** is prescribed. For example, to clear symptoms for students sitting exams who have severe symptoms which are not eased by other treatments. Steroids are good at reducing inflammation, and usually work well. A short course is usually safe. However, you should not take steroid tablets for long periods to treat hay fever, as serious side-effects may develop.

Asthma and hay fever

If you develop asthma symptoms during the hay fever season you may be prescribed an inhaler. If you already have asthma, you may find that your asthma becomes worse in the hay fever season. You may need an increase in the dose of your inhalers.

Follow up

Treatment works well in most cases. Tell your doctor if symptoms persist, despite treatment. A change in treatment, or an alteration in the dose of a current treatment may be an option to ease symptoms which persist. Your doctor will advise.