

Patient leaflets from the BMJ Group

Hay fever

If you sneeze, get a blocked nose and have puffy eyes at the same time every year, you probably have hay fever. It can be annoying, but there are good treatments that can help.

What is it?

Hay fever is an allergy. Allergies happen when your body overreacts to something that's harmless for most people. If you have hay fever, you're allergic to the pollen or spores that plants release into the air.

The amount of pollen in the air depends on the time of year. In the UK, the hay fever season runs from around April to August, although it varies from year to year and from place to place.

What are the symptoms?

Hay fever can make you sneeze a lot. You may also get a runny, itchy or blocked nose. Severe hay fever can give you a tickly cough, make your eyes water and turn red, and make your throat or ears itch.

There are other allergies that cause similar symptoms to hay fever. Hay fever usually affects people for a few weeks or months at the same time every year. If you get symptoms more often, you may be allergic to something else, such as animal fur. If your doctor isn't sure whether you have hay fever or another allergy, he or she can do tests to find out.

You should tell your doctor if you cough or wheeze when you have hay fever. Your doctor may want to check whether you have asthma.

What treatments work?

There are several good treatments for hay fever. Most of them come as tablets or a spray you breathe in through your nose. You can also get eye drops to help with itchy or watery eyes. You can buy some treatments yourself from a chemist, and get others from your doctor. Avoiding pollen can also help stop you getting hay fever symptoms.

Avoiding pollen

It's worth avoiding pollen or mould as much as you can, although sometimes it's not possible. With the right treatment, you shouldn't have to stop doing the things you want to do.

You'll often see pollen counts mentioned in weather reports, or you can look them up on the Internet. You can get pollen forecasts from the National Pollen and Aerobiology Research Unit (<http://www.pollenuk.co.uk>) or the BBC

Hay fever

(<http://www.bbc.co.uk/weather/pollen/>). Pollen levels tend to be higher on warm, dry, breezy days. They're worst in the morning, before 10 a.m.

It may help if you avoid drying your clothes outdoors. When you're outside, close-fitting sunglasses may help keep pollen out of your eyes. If you're driving, keep the car windows closed and use air conditioning, if you have it.

Things like air pollution, tobacco smoke or insect repellent sprays can all make your hay fever worse. So you may want to avoid these too.

Medicines for hay fever

If you have mild hay fever, **antihistamines** may be the only treatment you need. They come as tablets or as a liquid. You can buy some antihistamines from a chemist, but you'll need a doctor's prescription for others. There's lots of research to show that antihistamines reduce the symptoms of hay fever, such as a runny nose and sneezing. They don't help as much with a blocked nose.

Antihistamines you can buy over the counter include acrivastine (brand name Benadryl Allergy Relief), cetirizine (Zirtek Allergy Relief) and loratadine (Claritin). Most chemists also sell own-brand versions of these drugs. It's worth looking at these, as they contain the same medicine as the branded ones, but are usually cheaper.

Older antihistamines can cause drowsiness as a side effect. The ones we've listed here are newer drugs that aim not to cause this problem. But they still seem to make some people drowsy. If you get this side effect, you shouldn't drive or use heavy machinery. You may want to talk to your doctor about trying a different antihistamine.

You can also get an antihistamine spray that you breathe in through your nose. It's called azelastine (Rhinolast). You can get it on prescription from your doctor. Some small studies say that antihistamine sprays work just as well as tablets, but there's not enough research to be certain. They might be useful if you're using another treatment and still get symptoms. Try not to tilt your head back when you use these sprays. The medicine can trickle down your throat and cause a bitter taste in your mouth.

Taking **decongestant tablets** to unblock your nose seems to help if you take them together with an antihistamine. You may be able to breathe more easily. You can buy a decongestant called pseudoephedrine (Sudafed) from a chemist. You can also buy pseudoephedrine combined with an antihistamine in one tablet, called Benadryl Plus. You could also try decongestant nasal sprays, but you shouldn't take these for longer than a week. After that, they can make your blocked nose worse when you stop taking them.

The most common side effects of pseudoephedrine are headaches and problems sleeping. Decongestant tablets aren't usually recommended for children with hay fever.

If you've tried antihistamines and they don't help, you may want to try a steroid nasal spray. You can take it together with an antihistamine. The steroids used for hay fever aren't the same as the anabolic steroids that some bodybuilders use. The steroids used for hay fever are called **corticosteroids**. They can help with sneezing, a runny and itchy

Hay fever

nose, and feeling blocked up. They may work better than antihistamines. They're useful for more severe hay fever or hay fever that lasts a long time.

You can buy some steroid sprays from a chemist. These are beclometasone (brand names are Beconase and Care Hayfever Relief) and fluticasone (Flixonase). They're not recommended for anyone under 18. Other steroid sprays and sprays for children need a doctor's prescription.

You need to take a steroid spray once or twice a day, and keep taking it every day through the hay fever season. Your spray will work best if you start using it about two weeks before the hay fever season starts. Side effects are usually mild. You may get nosebleeds or irritation in your nose.

There's a chance of more severe side effects if you use a high dose of a steroid spray for a long time. You should take the lowest dose that works for you. If a child uses steroid sprays for a long time, they should see a doctor every so often to make sure their growth isn't affected.

A nasal spray called **sodium cromoglicate** (brand names Rynacrom and Vividrin) is sometimes used instead of steroids, especially for children. You can buy it from a chemist. The best time to start using cromolyn is before hay fever season begins.

If you get itchy, gritty or watery eyes, you may want to try treatment with **eye drops**. You can buy drops that contain antihistamines (such as Otrivine Antistin Eye Drops) or sodium cromoglicate (brands include Opticrom Allergy Eye Drops).

What will happen to me?

Most people who get hay fever just find it a nuisance. But severe hay fever can get in the way of everyday activities, like school, work or sport. Hay fever can be especially difficult for children. See a doctor if your hay fever gets bad. He or she will be able to suggest stronger treatments than the ones you can get from a pharmacy.

© BMJ Publishing Group Limited 2007. All rights reserved.

This information is aimed at a UK patient audience. This information however does not replace medical advice.

If you have a medical problem please see your doctor. Please see our full Conditions of Use for this content

<http://besttreatments.bmj.com/btuk/about/12.html>.

BMJ Group