

# Hay fever



What you  
should know...



## Hay fever

Hay fever affects up to one in five people at some point in their lives. When you have an allergic reaction, your body becomes sensitive to something it sees as a threat. Your immune system (the body's natural defence) responds to the threat, and it's this reaction that causes the symptoms of hay fever.

Hay fever is an allergy to pollen. Pollen is a fine powder released by plants as part of their reproductive cycle. It contains proteins that can cause the nose, eyes, throat and sinuses to become swollen, irritated and inflamed.

This causes the symptoms of an allergic reaction, such as:

- sneezing
- a runny, itchy or blocked nose
- watery, itchy eyes
- itchy throat
- headache, sinus pain
- inflammation of the sinuses (sinusitis)
- children may also develop a middle ear infection (otitis media)

## Who's affected?

Hay fever is one of the most common allergic conditions. It's estimated that there are more than 10 million people with hay fever in England.

You can get hay fever at any age, although it usually begins in childhood or during the teenage years. It's more common in boys than girls. In adults, men and women are equally affected.

You're more likely to develop hay fever if you have a family history of allergies, particularly asthma or eczema.

Many people find their symptoms improve as they get older. Around half of people report some improvement in symptoms after several years. Symptoms disappear completely in around 10-20% of people.

## Risk factors

There are several factors that can increase your risk of developing hay fever:

- having asthma or another allergic condition, such as eczema
- having a family history of hay fever
- being exposed to tobacco smoke and diesel exhaust particles during early childhood

## Pollen

There are around 30 types of pollen that could cause your hay fever including:

- **grass** – in the UK, about nine out of 10 (90%) of people with hay fever are allergic to Timothy and Rye grass pollen
- **trees** – about one in four (25%) of people with hay fever in the UK are allergic to pollen from trees, including oak, ash, cedar and birch
- **weeds** – such as dock, mugwort and nettles; being allergic to weeds is less common and tends to occur during the autumn

Depending on which type of pollen you're allergic to, you may experience hay fever symptoms at different times.

## Fungi

Some people can also develop a hay fever-like allergy to fungi. Fungi can release tiny particles called spores, which can be inhaled in the same way as pollen.

Fungi spores are most widespread during periods of wet or damp weather, but can also grow indoors in damp areas such as under washing machines or sinks.

In the UK, the pollen count season is usually separated into three periods:

- **tree pollen** – late March to mid-May
- **grass pollen** – mid-May to July
- **weed pollen** – end of June to September



## The effect of the weather

The amount of sunshine, rain or wind affects how much pollen plants release and how much it's spread around. On humid and windy days, pollen spreads easily. On rainy days pollen may be cleared from the air, helping pollen levels to fall.

During their pollen season, plants release pollen early in the morning. As the day gets warmer and more flowers open, pollen levels rise. On sunny days, the pollen count is highest in the early evening.

## Hay fever treatment

There is no cure for hay fever, but most people are able to tackle their symptoms with treatment.

The most effective way to control hay fever would be to avoid exposure to pollen. You can do this by:

- wearing wraparound sunglasses to stop pollen getting in your eyes when you're outdoors
- taking a shower and changing your clothes after being outdoors to remove the pollen on your body
- staying indoors and keeping windows closed when the pollen count is high (over 50 grains per cubic metre of air)
- applying a small amount of Vaseline (petroleum gel) to the nasal openings to trap pollen grains

Hay fever can often be controlled using over-the-counter medication from your pharmacist. These include antihistamines, which can help to prevent an allergic reaction from occurring and corticosteroids (steroids), which help to reduce inflammation and swelling. Treatments are available in different forms e.g. tablet, capsule, liquid, nasal spray and eye drops.

**Please ask your pharmacist for the most appropriate medication.**

If your symptoms are more troublesome e.g. you have breathing difficulties, or if you are pregnant or breastfeeding, your pharmacist may recommend you visit your GP to discuss whether you may need prescription medication.

\*information correct at time of print. Printed February 2021.

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