



## Leaflet: Hay Fever

# Hay Fever

About 1 in 10 people in the UK have hay fever each year. It has become more common in recent years. It usually develops before the age of 20. Treatment is usually effective. Hay fever is caused by an allergy to pollens or moulds. Grass pollen is the most common cause (May to June). Less common causes are tree pollens (March to May) and moulds (July to September).

Without treatment, symptoms range from mild irritation to complete misery. They include a runny and blocked nose, sneezing, itchy and watery red eyes, sore throat, sweats and wheeziness. Sometimes only nose symptoms or only eye symptoms occur. Symptoms are due to histamine and other chemicals being released by the immune system 'over-reacting' to pollen.

## What are the treatments for hay fever?

### *Avoid pollen*

Try to keep exposure to pollen to a minimum. The following tips may help.

- ◆ Listen to the pollen forecast and plan the day accordingly. Try to stay indoors as much as possible and keep windows and doors shut when the pollen count is high.
- ◆ Avoid cutting grass, picnics and camping.
- ◆ Shower and wash hair after being outdoors when the pollen count is high. In particular, on returning from trips to the countryside.
- ◆ Wear wrap around sunglasses when out.
- ◆ Bring in washing and close bedroom windows before the evening when pollen descends as the air cools.
- ◆ Keep car windows closed and consider buying an air filter for the car.

### *Mild or intermittent symptoms*

All that is required for many people is to take antihistamine tablets or medicine as required. Antihistamines ease most of the symptoms but may not be so good at relieving nasal congestion (a 'bunged-up' nose). Symptoms may come and go over the season and a tablet or dose of medicine usually works quickly to ease symptoms. Various preparations are available both at pharmacies and on prescription. Older anti-histamines such as chlorpheniramine (Piriton) work well but make some people drowsy. However, there are several newer preparations that are popular as they are effective and drowsiness is less of a problem.

### *Regular symptoms*

Anti-histamine medication taken regularly may keep symptoms away. In addition, a nose spray and/or eye drops may be prescribed if symptoms are not fully controlled.

- ◆ Anti-inflammatory nose sprays work by damping down inflammation in the nose. They take several days to build up their effect and then need to be taken each day to keep symptoms away. There are several types available on prescription. (Decongestant nose sprays that may be bought at pharmacies are not usually recommended. They may help clear a blocked nose quickly but if used for more than 5-7 days a 'rebound' worse congestion of the nose often develops. One may be useful for a few days to 'de-bung' the nose when first using an anti-inflammatory nose spray).
- ◆ Eye drops, like nose sprays, work by damping down inflammation. Unlike nose sprays they work quickly so may be taken 'as required' or regularly if symptoms occur each day.

If nose sprays or eye drops were needed one year then it is likely they will be needed every year. Ideally, an anti-inflammatory nose spray should be started 1-2 weeks before the hay fever season is expected and before symptoms start. It will then have time to get into the tissues and work to prevent symptoms developing.

*Severe symptoms*

Rarely, a short course of steroid tablets is prescribed. For example, to clear symptoms for students sitting exams who have severe symptoms not controlled by the above treatments. Steroids are good at reducing inflammation and usually work well. A short course is usually safe. However, steroids should not be taken for long periods to treat hay fever as side effects may become a problem.

Some people develop asthma symptoms such as wheezing and breathlessness in the hay fever season. An inhaler may then be advised for the duration of the season.

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