

Hay Fever

What is hay fever?

Hay fever is an allergic reaction. Usually it is a reaction to pollens of trees, grasses, and weeds. Sometimes it is an allergy to mold spores.

Hay fever may happen any time of the year, but it generally happens in the spring, summer, or fall. It is also called seasonal allergic rhinitis.

What is the cause?

Allergic symptoms result from your body's reactions to substances that your body sees as foreign. Substances that cause an allergic reaction are called allergens.

The allergens that usually cause hay fever are pollen and mold. They float in the air and are spread by the wind. The type of pollen in the air depends on the growing season and where you live. Tree pollens cause most hay fever in the spring. Grass and some weed pollens are usually the cause in the summer. From late summer to the first frost, other weed pollens, like ragweed, cause hay fever.

The parts of the body that are most often affected by hay fever are the eyes, nose, sinuses, and the tube that connects the middle ear with the back of the throat. Less often, the lungs are affected. If you are allergic to pollen or molds, these substances cause cells in these parts of your body to release a chemical called histamine. Histamine causes the tissues to itch, swell, and produce more mucus or tears than normal.

As many as 1 in 10 people suffer from hay fever at some time in their lives. Hay fever is more common in people with other allergic conditions such as asthma or eczema. It tends to run in families. You may start having hay fever at any age.

What are the symptoms?

Common symptoms are:

- Sneezing
- Stuffy or runny nose
- Itchy nose, throat, or ear canals
- Ear congestion
- Red, Itchy, watery eyes
- Postnasal drainage (mucus draining down the back of your throat)

Other symptoms may include:

- Headache
- Shortness of breath, especially with exercise or exertion
- Coughing
- Wheezing

How is it diagnosed?

Your healthcare provider will ask about your symptoms and medical history and examine your ears, nose, and throat. If your symptoms happen just in certain seasons, your healthcare provider will suspect that you have hay fever.

Your provider may swab the lining of your nose to look for a kind of allergy cells in a sample of mucus.

Because the treatment for most cases of hay fever is the same, no matter what you are allergic to, allergy testing is usually not necessary. Your provider may suggest some tests if medicine is not helping your symptoms enough, especially if you may need allergy shots to control them.

How is it treated?

If you know what you are allergic to—pollen, for example—you can try to avoid it. For example, you can try using an air conditioner rather than an attic or window fan. The air conditioner doesn't let as much pollen get into your home.

Medicine

Many hay fever symptoms are so mild that they don't need treatment. Or you may just need to take a nonprescription medicine once in a while. Many nonprescription medicines are available, such as decongestants and antihistamines. If nonprescription medicines do not control your symptoms, your healthcare provider may prescribe antihistamine pills, nasal spray, or eyedrops.

Decongestants shrink the swollen lining tissues of the ear, nose, and sinuses. Possible side effects of the medicine are trouble sleeping, fast heart rate, and higher blood pressure. They should be used with great caution in older adults.

Antihistamines fight the effects of histamine on your tissues. You may need to take these medicines only when your symptoms are bothering you. Or you might take them daily during your allergy season(s) to prevent symptoms.

There are different types of antihistamines. Drowsiness is a common side effect of many antihistamines. This may not be a problem if a dose at bedtime is all you need. Or you might try the medicine for several days even though it is making you drowsy. Often the drowsiness goes away after you have taken the drug for 3 to 5 days. Some antihistamines, especially the newer ones called nonsedating antihistamines, don't usually cause drowsiness. They work well for most people, and some can be bought without a prescription. Antihistamines can have other side effects as well. Ask your healthcare provider or pharmacist about this.

If antihistamines don't help eye symptoms, your healthcare provider may prescribe allergy eye drops.

Prescription nose sprays containing steroid medicine can prevent or control nasal and sinus congestion, runny nose, and postnasal drainage. They also help eye allergy symptoms. A nonprescription nose spray containing cromolyn is also very effective. These nose sprays work best to relieve symptoms if you use them on a regular basis during the allergy season. Steroid sprays require a few days to build up in the tissues of the nose before they start to work. They need to be used every

day to be effective. Ask your healthcare provider how you should use your steroid nasal spray. Using a steroid for a long time can have serious side effects. Take steroid medicine exactly as your healthcare provider prescribes. Don't take more or less of it than prescribed by your provider and don't take it longer than prescribed. Don't stop taking a steroid without your provider's approval. You may have to lower your dosage slowly before stopping it.

Nonprescription decongestant nose sprays are available for short-term use. Generally you should not use these sprays for more than 3 days. They can make the nose swelling and congestion worse if they are used for more than a few days. Ask your healthcare provider if it is OK for you to use a nasal spray decongestant longer than this.

Symptoms that affect your breathing are treated with medicines used to treat asthma, such as:

- Quick-acting, inhaled bronchodilators to treat symptoms
- Other types of pills and inhaled medicines to prevent symptoms

Allergy shots

If medicines don't control your symptoms, or if you often have complications, such as ear or sinus infections or asthma attacks, your healthcare provider may suggest allergy shots. First you will have tests to find out what you are allergic to. For most people the best tests are skin scratch or prick tests. For these tests tiny amounts of suspected allergens are put under your skin. Your provider then looks for reactions to the allergens.

For your allergy shots, a mixture is prepared that contains the allergens found with your allergy tests. The mixture is injected into your skin in tiny but increasing amounts over the course of many months. Over time, the shots make you less sensitive to the allergens. Usually after 4 to 6 months of allergy shots you will start to have relief from your symptoms. However, you may need to keep getting the shots for at least 2 years and sometimes longer.

How long will the effects last?

Allergies last different amounts of time from person to person. Children with hay fever may keep having seasonal allergies as they grow older, or the allergies may go away over time. If you start having allergies as an adult, you will probably keep having them. However, the allergies may stop if you move to a place with different allergens in the air.

How can I take care of myself?

Here are some things you can do to help lessen or prevent symptoms caused by hay fever:

- Follow your healthcare provider's advice for controlling your symptoms.
- If you usually get symptoms when you are housecleaning or doing yard work, wear a mask over your nose and mouth during these chores. (You can buy masks at the drug store.) Don't stay in the house when someone else is cleaning your house.

- Vacuum your carpets, curtains, and soft furniture often. Clean your uncarpeted floors with a damp mop or cloth.
- Remove any mold you find in your home. Use paint rather than wallpaper on your walls. Don't put carpet in damp areas.
- Stay away from trees and grass as much as you can during pollen season.
- Keep doors and windows shut during pollen season. Use an air conditioner, if you have one, in your house and car. Do not use a window or attic fan.
- Shower or bathe each evening to remove pollens or other allergens from your hair and skin.
- Use artificial-tears eyedrops to help wash out the eyes. Antihistamine eyedrops may help, too. You can get these eyedrops at the store without a prescription.
- You may find that nasal saline rinsing helps. It can remove dirt, dust, and pollen, as well as help to loosen thick mucus. Nasal saline rinses can help relieve nasal symptoms of allergies. Be sure to carefully follow the directions for preparing the water used for the rinse.
- If you smoke, try to quit. Cigarette smoke can make hay fever and asthma symptoms worse. Talk to your healthcare provider about ways to quit smoking. Also try to stay away from others who are smoking.

Hay fever and allergy problems are a common complaint during pregnancy. Many of the medicines used to relieve the symptoms of allergies, such as antihistamines, decongestants, or even inhaled steroids, are considered safe to use during pregnancy. However, if you are pregnant, you should talk to your healthcare provider before you use any allergy medicine.

How can I help prevent hay fever?

There is no sure way to prevent allergies. Some research has shown that breast-fed babies may be less likely than bottle-fed babies to have allergies or asthma. Also, exposure to tobacco smoke has been shown to increase children's risk for developing allergies and asthma, especially if these problems run in their families.

If your family has a very strong history of allergies, you might try to avoid your family's most common allergens. For example, staying away from cats might keep you from becoming allergic to cats.

Once allergies have developed, you can try to avoid having a reaction by limiting your exposure to the things you are allergic to. In severe cases, you may need to move to another area, but you may develop allergies there as well.

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