

# Managing your hay fever

Department of Asthma and Allergy

Information for Patients

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## What is hay fever?

Hay fever is also known as seasonal allergic rhinitis. It is caused by an allergy to tree, grass or weed pollen. Symptoms of hay fever develop during the season, and can vary depending on the pollen type. For example grass pollen can be around the end of May until September and tree pollen starts as early as February through to May, particularly when it is warm, humid and windy. Symptoms can then disappear as the season ends.

Hay fever symptoms are caused by pollen breathed into your nose and sometimes your lungs. If you are allergic to pollens your body overreacts and mistakes the pollen as harmful. Your body then releases chemicals (such as histamine) causing redness, rash, itch and swelling.

## What are the symptoms?

Symptoms of hay fever can be one or more of the following:

- Blocked, runny, itchy nose and sneezing.
- Itchy, watery and red eyes.
- Headaches, facial pain and loss of concentration.
- Poor smell or taste and itchy back of the throat.

Symptoms may vary depending on how high the pollen level is and also from year to year. Hay fever will last for weeks or months unlike a cold which usually goes away after 1 to 2 weeks.

Hay fever may also trigger asthma in some people causing shortness of breath, chest tightness, wheezing and cough. If you have asthma and your symptoms get worse in hay fever season, either follow your asthma action plan or see your GP for advice. If you experience these symptoms for the first time then you should also see your GP for assessment of your chest.

**Health information and support is available at [www.nhs.uk](http://www.nhs.uk)  
or call 111 for non-emergency medical advice**

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## Tips to reduce exposure to triggers that make hay fever worse

Pollens are hard to avoid but there are steps that can be taken to reduce the amount of exposure:

- Keep doors and windows closed, especially in the morning and early evening as this is when pollen is at its highest level. Avoid mowing the lawn.
- Vacuum regularly using a vacuum with a special HEPA filter and dust with a damp cloth.
- Shower to remove pollen from your skin and hair. Avoid drying clothes outdoors.
- Splash your eyes with cold water and wear wrap around sunglasses outdoors.
- Smear Vaseline inside your nose to help stop the pollen settling.
- Keep car windows closed and consider a pollen filter for the air vents in your car.

## Medication / treatments for hay fever

- **Antihistamines:** - these can help with symptoms of sneezing, itch and a runny nose. Some can cause tiredness (drowsiness) so you need to avoid them if you operate machinery. Many antihistamines are available in your local pharmacy or supermarket without prescription.
- **Nose sprays (corticosteroids):** - these can help with sneezing, runny or blocked nose (congestion) that isn't helped by antihistamines. You should start to use a nasal spray 2 weeks before hay fever season starts and continue throughout the season. Read the information leaflet that comes with the spray, or ask your pharmacist for help to make sure you use it correctly.
- **Eye treatments:** - if you suffer from itchy, runny and swollen eyes, antihistamines can help. If symptoms continue, eye drops from your pharmacy or GP can also help. Splash your eyes with cool water.
- **Other treatment options:** - if you are using the above treatment and your hay fever is still causing you distress, you should see your GP. A short course of steroid tablets may be prescribed. Referral to a hospital based allergy clinic may be advised if you have difficulty controlling your symptoms.
- **Desensitisation:** - this is a treatment that encourages your body to gradually get used to the allergen over time. You are given small amounts of the allergen that causes your symptoms, over a 3 year period. This treatment is for people with severe hay fever symptoms that are not controlled by other medication.

## Further information

- Allergy UK: [www.allergyuk.org](http://www.allergyuk.org) / email: [info@allergyuk.org](mailto:info@allergyuk.org) / helpline: 01322 619 898
- Asthma UK: [www.asthma.org.uk](http://www.asthma.org.uk) / helpline: 0300 222 5800 (Mon to Fri, 9am to 5pm) or chat with Asthma UK nurse team via WhatsApp: 07378 606 728

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