



Hay fever

Hay fever affects 2 in 5 people in Australia. Whilst it is often considered to be a trivial illness, untreated hay fever has a significant impact on mood, learning and work performance. Although there are no cures, effective treatment is available.

What is hay fever?

Hay fever is the common name for allergic rhinitis. People with hay fever can also have problems with their throat, eyes and ears, and sinus infections are more common.

Substances called allergens trigger symptoms in people with hay fever. Symptoms occurring mainly in Spring and Summer are usually triggered by wind blown pollen from grasses, weeds or trees. When problems occur all year, they are usually triggered by house dust mite, animal danders or mould spores.

Hay fever symptoms

As well as sneezing, runny and blocked nose and irritated eyes, untreated hay fever can result in poor quality sleep, fatigue and daytime sleepiness. Severe hay fever can also:

- Make asthma more difficult to control
- Make people more prone to sinus infections
- Impair learning and performance in children
- Result in bad breath, a husky voice and sore throat
- Make people tired and run down due to poor quality sleep
- Worsen snoring and the tendency to have sleep apnoea in adults
- Result in more frequent eye infections because people rub itchy eyes

Effective treatment is available. Options include:

- Avoidance of allergic triggers
- Non-medicated treatment
- Medication (oral and topical)
- Immunotherapy

Avoidance of allergic triggers

It is best to avoid the cause or reduce exposure if possible. Neither medication nor immunotherapy (allergy vaccination /desensitization) are substitutes for reducing exposure to allergic triggers.

In some cases a cause may be obvious (eg pet). In other cases it may be necessary to seek medical advice to help identify the offending allergen/s. To do this, doctors will ask you a series of questions and may use allergy tests (eg skin prick tests or RAST blood tests) to identify the cause.

Once the cause(s) is identified, steps can be taken to minimize exposure or remove it. Some allergens such as pollen can be difficult to avoid.

Non Medicated Treatment

However "natural" it may seem, you should inform your doctor or pharmacist of any complementary treatments you are taking (eg. herbs, dietary supplements). Sometimes these products can cause side effects or interact with other medications.

Steam and salt water (saline) sprays used on a regular basis can help to relieve nasal blockage and thick secretions. Echinacea should be used with caution, particularly in people who are allergic to pollen, as several adverse reactions to echinacea have been reported.



Medication

Although medications do not cure allergies, those currently available are much more effective with fewer side effects than those used several years ago. You just need to know the best way to use them, and avoid medicines that can cause more problems than they solve, like decongestant (“unblocking”) nose sprays. Your doctor or pharmacist can advise you about the best medicines to use to treat your symptoms.

Oral Medication

The most common oral medications taken for hay fever are antihistamine tablets.

Antihistamines help control sneezing and itching, but are not as effective for controlling severe nasal blockage and dribble. The advantage of antihistamines is their flexibility. They can be used as needed, regularly or to reduce or prevent symptoms when exposure to allergen is anticipated. The new antihistamines (eg *Zyrtec*, *Telfast*, *Lorastyne*, *Claratyne*, *Claramax*) are significantly less sedating than the older antihistamines.

Decongestant tablets (*Pseudoephedrine* or *Phenlephrine*) – will unblock and dry the nose. Uncomfortable “stimulant” side effects like tremor, trouble sleeping, anxiety or an increase in blood pressure may occur in some people. Those with high blood pressure (hypertension) should not take these.

Combination drugs containing antihistamines and decongestants (eg *Telfast Decongestant*, *Clarinase*) provides greater symptomatic relief than antihistamines alone, particularly when nasal congestion is a major problem. As with decongestants, these can cause side effects in some people.

Topical medication – Nasal Sprays, Eye Drops

Topical medications are applied directly to the part being treated. They include nasal sprays and eye drops.

Corticosteroid nasal sprays (eg *Rhinocort*, *Nasonex*, *Budamax*, *Beconase*, *Allermax*, *Aldecin*) have been shown to be very effective in preventing and treating hay fever, particularly in people with severe and prolonged symptoms, including nasal blockage, discharge, sneezing, nasal itch, post-nasal drip and eye symptoms. They are more effective than antihistamines when nasal congestion and mucus are major problems. They need to be used regularly as directed to be effective

Like corticosteroid “puffers” used in asthma, nasal sprays reduce inflammation, which is the cause of nasal blockage and other symptoms. Once symptoms have been controlled the dose may be reduced, but the nasal spray will need to be used regularly.

Immunotherapy

Immunotherapy is the closest thing to a cure for allergy. It involves the administration of gradually increasing amounts of allergic material, given to patients by injection over a period of years.

These allergy injections alter the way in which the immune system reacts to allergens, by “switching off” allergy receptors. The end result is that you become “immune” to the allergens, so that you can tolerate them with fewer or no symptoms.

Immunotherapy is often recommended for treatment of hay fever (and sometimes asthma) when symptoms are severe, the cause is difficult to avoid or medications don't help or cause side effects.

For more information contact Asthma Foundation of QLD on 1800 645 130.

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