

Self-care information on...

Hay fever



What is hay fever and what causes it?

Hay fever is a common allergic condition. It is caused by an allergic reaction to pollen. Pollen is a fine powder released by plants as part of their reproductive cycle. When these tiny particles come into contact with the cells that line your mouth, nose, eyes and throat, they can irritate them and trigger an allergic reaction.

During an allergic reaction the body releases a number of chemicals. These chemicals then cause the symptoms of hay fever, such as watering eyes and a runny nose.

Hay fever is also called seasonal allergic rhinitis because symptoms tend to occur at the same time, or in the same season, each year.

You can have an allergy to:

- Tree pollen, released during spring
- Grass pollen, released at the end of spring and beginning of summer
- Weed pollen, released any time from early spring to late autumn

What are the symptoms of hay fever?

- Frequent sneezing
- Runny or blocked nose
- Itchy, red or watery eyes (also known as allergic conjunctivitis)
- An itchy throat, mouth, nose and ears.

Less commonly, you may experience:

- Loss of your sense of smell
- Facial pain
- Sweats
- Headaches

Hay fever symptoms vary in severity and your symptoms may be worse some years than others, depending on the weather conditions and the pollen count. Hay fever symptoms are likely to be worse if the pollen count is high. The pollen count is usually given as part of the weather forecast during the spring and summer months. Your symptoms may start at different times of the year, depending on which types of pollen you are allergic to.

While symptoms of hay fever may be mild, they can interfere with your sleep and your daily activities at school or work.

Hay fever and asthma

If you have asthma, your asthma symptoms may get worse when you have hay fever. Sometimes, asthma symptoms only occur when you have hay fever.

These symptoms may include:

- Tight chest
- Shortness of breath
- Coughing
- Wheezing

How do you treat hay fever?

	Pros	Cons
<p>Pollen avoidance</p> <p>Taking steps to minimise your exposure to pollen, such as closing windows, wearing wraparound sunglasses and avoiding grassy areas.</p> <p>Rub a small amount of Vaseline inside lower nostrils, this helps to stop pollen entering the nasal passages.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Can often help relieve symptoms without the need for medication.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Not always sufficient.
<p>Antihistamines</p> <p>Antihistamines help block the effects of one of the chemicals released during an allergic reaction. This prevents the symptoms of an allergic reaction occurring.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Often effective in relieving symptoms such as itching, sneezing and watery eyes.• Available from pharmacies and supermarkets.• You can use antihistamines when required or take them regularly to prevent symptoms occurring.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Might not be effective in treating a blocked-up nose.• Can cause drowsiness in some people.
<p>Steroid nasal sprays</p> <p>Steroid nasal sprays can help reduce levels of inflammation around the eyes and inside the nasal passages.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Can be an effective treatment for a blocked nose and watery eyes when antihistamines fail to work.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Side effects can include nasal irritation and dryness, nosebleeds, an unpleasant taste in the mouth and itchy skin around the nose.• They need to be used regularly and work best when started a couple of weeks before your symptoms usually begin.
<p>Eye drops</p> <p>Eye drops containing anti-inflammatory medicines.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Effective in the treatment of watery, itchy and red eyes.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Side effects can include some mild stinging and burning of the eyes.

Type of medicine	Examples of products available to purchase	Additional information	Approximate cost
Antihistamine	Loratadine tablets	Available from supermarkets and pharmacies.	From £1.50 for 14 tablets
	Cetirizine tablets	Available from supermarkets and pharmacies.	From £1.50 for 14 tablets
Steroid nasal sprays	Beclometasone nasal spray (brands include Beconase Hayfever Relief [®])	For use in adults >18years only. Available from supermarkets and pharmacies.	From £4.89
	Fluticasone nasal spray (brands include Pirinase [®] nasal spray)	For use in adults >18years only. Available from pharmacies only.	From £5.30
Eye drops	Sodium cromoglicate eye drops (brands include Allercrom [®] eye drops)	Available from supermarkets and pharmacies.	From £5.20

When to contact your GP practice

Most cases of hay fever can be treated using medication from a pharmacy or supermarket.

If you are unclear which treatment would be best, or if you already take medication for other conditions, your local pharmacist can advise on appropriate treatments for you or your children.

You would normally only need to visit your GP practice if:

- You cannot control your symptoms with medications you have purchased or you are having troublesome side effects caused by the medication.
- You are experiencing worsening of asthma or any shortness of breath.
- The pattern of your symptoms is unusual; such as occurring during the winter or only at your workplace. It is likely that a substance other than pollen is responsible and further testing may be required to confirm this.

If you need any further information:

- Ask your pharmacist
- NHS choices: www.nhs.uk
- Patient UK www.patient.co.uk

