

Winning the Battle Against Allergies

Itchy, watery eyes, sneezing, runny nose, and nasal congestion. These are some of the most common symptoms of allergic rhinitis, better known as hay fever. Although it may seem like a common cold, allergies are not caused by viruses but are the result of an allergic reaction to different allergens, which commonly include pollen, dust, or pet dander. Some people may experience hay fever year-round, whereas others only experience flare-ups at certain times (generally in the spring and summer). Often patients will only experience minor symptoms causing a temporary nuisance, whereas others will have persistent symptoms that may affect life at work, school, and other activities.

Hay fever is caused by a reaction in your body to a harmless airborne substance. In a process known as sensitization your body's immune system will recognize these substances as something harmful and produce antibodies against them. The next time you come in contact with these substances (ie. pollen or dust) these newly formed antibodies will signal your immune system to release chemicals such as histamine into your blood stream. It is these chemicals that cause the symptoms we classify as hay fever.

Because the symptoms are very similar to those of the common cold, it is important to differentiate between the two as the treatment options vary. Colds generally begin one to three days after being exposed to the cold virus, and present with a sore/scratchy throat, cough, mild fever, and a runny nose with watery or thick yellow discharge. Hay fever on the other hand begins immediately after being exposed to the suspect allergen, and presents with itchy, watery eyes, runny nose with thin watery discharge, and no fever. Colds will last on average five to seven days, while allergic rhinitis will not go away until exposure to the allergen is eliminated.

There are many different over-the-counter and prescription medications available to help treat the symptoms of hay fever. These medications come in a variety of dosage forms including pills, liquids, nasal sprays and eye drops. Antihistamines (such as Aerius®, Reactine® and Benadryl®) are some of the most common medications to help relieve itching, sneezing and runny noses, but are less effective for nasal congestion. Decongestants on the other hand are used solely to relieve nasal congestion. Nasal saline spray, which is simply salt water, is another effective way to relieve congestion without the side-effects of other medicinal agents.

As with any other medications, allergy medications do not come without their share of side effects and warnings. Elderly patients and those with certain medical conditions (ie. high blood pressure, glaucoma and an enlarged prostate) may be at higher risk of side effects than others. Take for example the older antihistamines like Benadryl®, which are much more likely to cause drowsiness compared to the newer products, while oral decongestants are able to raise blood pressure in those who are already suffering from high blood pressure. These are only a few examples, which is why it is always important to consult with your pharmacist when selecting over-the-counter products.

Although over-the-counter medications may be enough to relieve your symptoms, there may be situations where you need to consult your doctor to receive prescription strength medication. A common prescription for congestion is a nasal corticosteroid which helps prevent and treat swelling inside the nose. It is appropriate to seek medical advice if your symptoms are ongoing and troublesome, over-the-counter products are not working for you, or if you have a condition that can make hay fever symptoms worse, such as nasal polyps, asthma, or frequent sinus infections.

There is no way to avoid getting hay fever, but there are ways to prevent its symptoms by avoiding the triggers that cause them. Some effective examples include closing windows during high pollen seasons, not hanging laundry outside (pollen can stick to towels and sheets), removing pets from the house if possible, and using allergy-proof covers on mattresses, box springs and pillows.

Although suffering from allergies may seem like a constant battle it is important to know that effective treatment options exist. Taking the necessary steps to avoid allergy triggers, and using appropriate medications can help alleviate your symptoms. Ask your local community pharmacist for more information.

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