

# Hay Fever and Other Allergies

## Things you can do to control your symptoms

### What causes allergies?

You have an *allergy* when your body overreacts to things that don't cause problems for most people. These things are called *allergens*. Sometimes the term *hay fever* is used to describe an allergic reaction to allergens in the air. Your body's overreaction to the allergen(s) is what causes symptoms (see the box below).

#### Symptoms of allergies

- Runny nose
- Watery eyes
- Itchy nose, eyes and roof of mouth
- Sneezing
- Stopped-up nose
- Pressure in the nose and cheeks
- Ear fullness and popping
- Dark circles under the eyes

### What are the most common allergens?

Common allergens in the air are pollen, mold, animal dander and dust. Many other things, such as those listed in the box on page 2, can make your allergy symptoms worse.

*Pollen* comes from trees, grass and weeds. Allergies that occur in the spring (late April and May) are often due to tree pollen. Allergies that occur in the summer (late May to mid-July) are often due to grass and weed pollen. Allergies that occur in the fall (late August to the first frost) are often due to weed pollen.

Pollen from flowering plants usually doesn't cause problems in people with allergies because the pollen is too heavy to float in the air. These plants rely on insects to carry their pollen.

*Mold* is common where water tends to collect, such as shower curtains, window moldings and damp basements. It can also be found in rotting logs, hay, mulches, commercial peat moss, compost piles and leaf litter. This allergy is usually worse during humid and rainy weather.

*Pet dander* is made up of bits of skin and hair from animals. Both are allergens. You can be exposed to dander when handling an animal or from house dust that contains dander.

*Dust* contains many allergens, including dust mites. Dust mites are tiny living creatures found in bedding, mattresses, carpeting and

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upholstered furniture. They like places where it's warm and humid. They live on dead skin cells and other things found in house dust.

#### Things that make allergies feel worse

- Aerosol sprays
- Air pollution
- Cold temperatures
- Humidity
- Irritating fumes
- Tobacco smoke
- Wind
- Wood smoke

### How can I avoid allergens?

**Pollens.** Shower or bathe before bedtime to wash off the pollen and other allergens that may have collected in your hair and on your skin. Avoid going outside, especially on dry, windy days. Keeping the windows and doors shut can be helpful, as can using an air conditioner both at home and in your car.

**Mold.** You can reduce the amount of mold in your home by removing houseplants and by frequently cleaning shower curtains, bathroom windows, damp walls, areas with dry rot and indoor trash cans. Use a mix of water and chlorine bleach to kill mold. Don't carpet bathrooms or other damp rooms and use mold-proof paint instead of wallpaper. Throw away old books, shoes and bedding, which can be a source for mold. Reducing the humidity in your home to 50% or less can also help.

**Pet dander.** You may need to give your pets away or at least keep them outside because they bring pollen as well as animal dander in with them. Cat or dog dander is often in house dust and takes four weeks or more to die down, so a short-term trial of removing your pet from your home may not help you find out if this is a problem for you.

**Dust.** You can reduce dust mites by removing the places in which they like to live and breed, such as carpets, drapes and feather pillows, and by making your home less inviting by lowering the humidity and frequently dusting with a damp cloth. See the box on page 3 for specific tips. Pay special attention to keeping your bedroom clean. This is where you spend much of your time at home.

Wear a mask when you clean. Even better, have someone else in your family clean for you or hire someone to clean.

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### Tips on reducing dust

- Remove drapes, feather pillows, upholstered furniture, nonwashable comforters and soft toys.
- Replace carpets with linoleum or wood. Polished floors are best.
- Mop the floor often with a damp mop and wipe surfaces with a damp cloth.
- Vacuum regularly with a machine that has a *high-efficiency particulate air filter*. Vacuum soft furniture and curtains as well as floors.
- Install an air cleaner with a high-efficiency particulate or *electrostatic* filter.
- Wash carpets and upholstery with special cleaners, such as benzyl benzoate or tannic acid spray.
- Wash all bedding in hot water (hotter than 130°F) every seven to 10 days.
- Don't use mattress pads.
- Cover mattress and pillows with plastic.
- Keep clutter to a minimum.
- Lower the humidity in your home.

### How are antihistamines used to treat allergies?

*Antihistamines* help reduce the sneezing, runny nose and itchiness of allergies. They're more useful if you use them before you're exposed to allergens.

You can buy some antihistamines without a prescription. Ingredients include brompheniramine, chlorpheniramine and triprolidine. These relieve symptoms just as well as prescription medicines do, but they tend to have more side effects than prescription medicines. For example, you may notice drowsiness and dryness in your mouth after taking them. This often improves after one to two weeks of regular use.

Some new antihistamines, such as astemizole (Hismanal), loratadine (Claritin) and terfenadine (Seldane), are less likely to cause tiredness or dry mouth, but they cost more and require a prescription.

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**What decongestants may be helpful?**

*Decongestants* help relieve the stopped-up nose of allergies. They come as pills, nose sprays and nose drops. It's best not to use nose sprays and drops for more than three days because you can become dependent on them very easily. This causes you to feel even more stopped-up when you try to quit using them than you did before you started.

You can buy decongestants without a doctor's prescription. Ingredients include ephedrine, phenylephrine, phenylpropanolamine and pseudoephedrine. Decongestants can raise your blood pressure, so it's a good idea to talk to your family doctor before using them.

Many medicines are available that combine both antihistamines and decongestants.

**How can inhaled steroids help?**

*Inhaled steroids* reduce the reaction of the nasal tissues to inhaled allergens. This helps relieve the swelling in your nose so that you feel less stopped-up. They come in nasal sprays that your doctor may prescribe. You won't notice their benefits for up to two weeks after starting them. Inhaled steroids include beclomethasone (Beconase, Vancenase), dexamethasone (Decadron) and flunisolide (Nasalide).

Inhaled steroids aren't as likely to have side effects as steroid pills, but you shouldn't use the sprays or drops more than your doctor suggests. Your doctor may prescribe steroid pills for you to use for a short time if your symptoms are severe or if other medicines aren't working for you.

**What is cromolyn sodium?**

*Cromolyn sodium* (Nasal crom) is a nasal spray that helps reduce the symptoms of allergies. Like nasal steroids, it prevents the body's reaction to allergens. It may not start to work until up to two to four weeks after you begin using it. Your doctor may prescribe cromolyn for you if your allergies are severe or if other medicines aren't working.

**What are allergy shots?**

Allergy shots (also called *immunotherapy*) contain small amounts of allergens. They're given on a regular schedule so that your body gets used to the allergens and no longer overreacts to them.

Allergy shots are only used when the allergens you're sensitive to can be identified and when you can't avoid coming into contact with them. It takes a few months to years to finish treatment, and you may need to have treatments throughout your life.

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This handout provides a general overview on this topic and may not apply to everyone. To find out if this handout applies to you and to get more information on this subject, talk to your family doctor.



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