

Allergic Rhinitis (Hayfever)

What is it?

Allergic rhinitis (commonly called hayfever) is an inflammation or irritation of the mucous membranes lining the nose. Common symptoms include sneezing, stuffy or runny nose, itchy eyes, nose and throat, and watery eyes. You may also have headaches, a nasally voice, breathe noisily, snore, feel tired, have a poor appetite, or feel nauseous.

That sounds terrible! What causes it?

Allergic rhinitis happens when an allergen (an allergy-producing substance, such as pollen) causes your body to defend itself and produce antibodies. When an allergen and an antibody combine, your body releases histamine and other chemical substances into your bloodstream, which causes an allergic response. Pollen, dust, mold or other substances that can be inhaled, are common allergens.

Seasonal allergic rhinitis usually results from tree, grass or weed pollen and, symptoms decrease with colder weather.

Perennial allergic rhinitis can cause year-round symptoms. This allergic reaction is the result of indoor irritants such as feathers, mold spores, animal dander or dust mites.

Because different types of pollen, dust and mold spores exist in various geographic locations, you may suddenly develop hayfever if you move.

How can I prevent it?

You can't prevent an allergy, but you *can* prevent a reaction. The most effective method is to avoid the allergen that triggers your allergy. Try these steps as well:

- If you're allergic to warm-blooded animals, keep your pet in a particular area of your home. It is especially important to keep warm-blooded pets out of the bedroom.
- Avoid pollen by using air conditioning, and by avoiding outside activity during pollen season.
- Check the material your pillows and comforters are made from. Feathers, foam rubber, or pillows more than five years old are often allergens.
- Avoid dust and mold. Try to make sure your bedroom is as allergen-free as possible:
 - move out unnecessary furniture
 - keep windows tightly shut
 - clean curtains, bedding and carpeting often
 - use pillows stuffed with polyester
 - enclose mattresses and box springs in plastic
 - cover or filter all vents
 - purchase a HEPA filter for your bedroom and possibly for other areas of your home
 - move out decorative pillows, books, and stuffed animals
 - keep the floors bare
 - use dusting products made to hold dust
 - never sweep - use a vacuum only

The following tips may also decrease the severity of your reaction and help increase your comfort:

- Eat a balanced diet to improve your body's ability to heal itself
- Sleep with your head elevated to prevent nasal congestion during the night
- Drink enough fluids (eight glasses per day) to loosen the secretions in your nose and throat
- Exercise regularly

How is hayfever diagnosed?

It is not always easy to diagnose allergic rhinitis. Many symptoms are similar to a cold so, if you use cold remedies, you may seem to improve for a short time. You may notice you have symptoms every August (or May) and that the symptoms last for about the same amount of time each year. If you have perennial allergic rhinitis, it is even harder to diagnose because there is no clear pattern of illness. Sometimes your clinician may order blood and skin tests to determine whether you have allergies.

How can I really treat this?

The best treatment for your allergy is to avoid the allergen. When this isn't possible, medication can usually control the symptoms of a reaction. Because each individual is unique, there is no standard treatment for allergic rhinitis. The best medication can only be determined by you and your clinician. It may take several trials for you to find the best medication and dosage.

Allergy shots are also used with allergic rhinitis. It's effective only when a specific allergen can be identified. Allergy shots are not a "quick fix" and may take months before effectiveness is noted.

Source material from: McKinley Health Center, Univ. of Illinois, Champaign Urbana

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