

Springtime Sniffles

Hay fever making you sneeze and wheeze? Here's how to feel better.

By Sarah Webb

Spring is here.

Too bad that blooming flowers and budding trees, though beautiful, also bring itchy eyes, runny noses, and sneezing. It's hay fever season. And for at least 36 million Americans, it's time for trips to the store for tissues or to the doctor for allergy tests and medications. But while some people suffer, others hardly sniffle. Why?

More Than Hay But No Fever

When spring starts in St. Louis, Samantha W.'s symptoms become so awful that she stays inside as much as possible. "My eyes itch, and I have a really, really runny nose," she says. The 12-year-old has struggled through hay fever seasons in the spring and fall since she was in second grade.

What we commonly call hay fever, doctors call *allergic rhinitis*. "It's usually not just hay, and you don't get [a] fever from it," says Phillip Korenblat, a doctor and spokesperson for the American Academy of Allergy Asthma & Immunology. With allergic rhinitis, a person is exposed to particles in the air, such as dust, dirt, and tiny pieces of plants, that irritate the inside of the nose. That can cause inflammation

or swelling. People typically get hay fever at the change of seasons, either in the spring or in the fall, before the first frost of the winter. People can be allergic to certain grasses or weeds that grow at those times of year. (See "Pollen Culprits.")

Typical allergy symptoms are itchy eyes, an itchy nose, and even an itchy throat. The itching can lead to a runny nose, sneezing, headaches, and sometimes coughing. Those symptoms can make it hard to tell the difference between hay fever and a cold. "If it's a cold that's not going away, then someone could have allergies," says Neeti Gupta, an *allergist* (a doctor who helps people with allergies) at Long Island Children's Hospital.

Although the symptoms can be similar, colds and allergies work differently in the body. When you have a cold, a *virus* (a type of germ) has invaded the body. The *immune system*, which helps protect your body from disease, works overtime to help the body clear the virus.

Allergies, however, develop in two stages. First, the body has to have been around an *allergen*, which is whatever causes the allergy, such as tree pollen. The

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body's immune system tries to fight the allergen. But later, when the body meets the allergen again, watery, itchy eyes, sneezing, and a runny nose are the result.

Why Doesn't Everyone Have Allergies?

Although hay fever and other allergies are very common, not everyone has them. Environment plays an important role because a person has to be exposed to the allergen regularly. But among people who are all exposed to the same pollens, *genetics*—characteristics passed down through a family—makes a difference in who develops symptoms. “The greatest predictor is if one or both of your parents have allergies,” Korenblat says.

High pollen counts—the amount of pollen being produced—can mean that more people suffer. “Last spring was especially bad because it was a mild winter. The trees were pollinating earlier and longer,” Gupta says. (See “How Hay Fever Happens” to understand what pollen does to the body.)

Coping With Hay Fever

For some people, feeling better can be as simple as keeping windows closed. Pollen counts are usually higher in the morning than later in the day, so some allergy sufferers might enjoy outdoor activities in the afternoon or evening.

For many people, over-the-counter *antihistamines*, medicines that fight allergy

symptoms, work. To deal with her itchy eyes and throat and runny nose, Meghna G., 13, from Montgomery, N.J., takes an antihistamine at night.

People who have allergy symptoms for long periods or are very uncomfortable may want to see a doctor or an allergist. Doctors can prescribe antihistamines, eye drops, and nose sprays that are stronger than over-the-counter drugs.

An allergist can also do tests to find out exactly what a person is allergic to. An allergist can then prescribe *allergy shots*, which lower the body's sensitivity to an allergen and eventually reduce or stop the allergic reaction.

After many of the medications from the pharmacy weren't working for her, Samantha started getting weekly allergy shots. They've helped manage her allergies through most of the year. Samantha also protects herself against the spring pollen by getting extra allergy shots in late winter to build up her immunity before the pollen comes out.

People who get allergy shots may have to get shots every week. For some people, it may take three to five years before the shots start working. Researchers are working on new allergy shots for ragweed, a common allergen, that could work in as few as six weekly doses. However, the shots require more testing and won't be available for a few years.

Those Tiresome Allergies

For kids who deal with them, allergies can be exhausting. Occasionally, Samantha runs into people who don't understand that leaving windows open can cause her to itch and sneeze, but she's learned how to talk about her allergies. With the help of doctors and medications, kids can cope with the sniffles and sneezes and breathe easier. **CHI**

Close-Up on Pollen

Here's a look at the stuff that can get into your nose and make you sneeze, sniffle, and itch! These pollens are active at different times of the year.



Ragweed

Highest Amounts: Mid-August until the first frost (this is actually closest to being the true “hay” in hay fever)



Grass Pollen

Highest Amounts: Late May until mid-July or early August



Tree Pollen

Highest Amounts: Early March or April and until mid-June



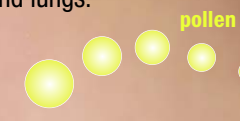
From left: Getty Images; David Scharf/Photo Researchers; Eye of Science/Photo Researchers

Pollen Culprits

Many allergy sufferers have hay fever at different times of the year because various trees, grasses, and weeds produce pollens during different seasons. Some pollens are also more common in certain areas of the country. To learn more about pollens where you live, visit the American Academy of Allergy Asthma & Immunology at www.aaaai.org and click on *Pollen Counts*.

HOW HAY FEVER HAPPENS

1. An allergen, such as ragweed **pollen**, gets into the eyes, nose, and lungs.



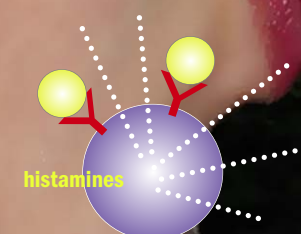
2. The body reacts to the first exposure by producing **antibodies** (proteins that fight invaders) to the pollen.



3. Antibodies attach to **mast cells**. Mast cells are a type of body tissue.



4. When pollen enters the body again, it attaches to the antibodies. The mast cells then release **histamines**, causing allergy symptoms.



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Adapted from the American Academy of Allergy Asthma & Immunology