

# Woman & Home

MAY 2005 £2.00

your wellbeing

An attack of sneezing or a blocked nose might feel like the onset of a summer cold, but it's actually more likely to be caused by an allergy. Between 15 to 30 per cent of people in the UK have full-blown hay fever and more and more have occasional attacks of the sniffles triggered by an allergy.

Many are allergic to grass pollen which is at its highest from early June to mid-July, while a quarter of people are allergic to pollen from silver birch trees. However, common sensitivity to hazel, yew, wild and elder may trigger symptoms as early as January and nettles, dock and other weeds can keep you sneezing right through until mid-September.

How to combat symptoms? The problem is that even severe sufferers forget about it until their first sneeze. Recent research, however, has shown that taking remedies days before your symptoms normally appear can make a dramatic difference.

According to Dr Adrian Morris, an allergy specialist at the Royal Brompton Hospital in London who also runs private allergy clinics in and around the capital, if you stop your body producing the allergic reaction by keeping up your medication throughout your allergy period (even if you feel no symptoms), you can escape the season symptom-free.

He says, "The biggest problem with patients who come to see me is usually a simple case of non-compliance. If they can avoid them, people hate taking drugs, preferring alternative solutions or doing nothing at all. I spend a lot of my time reassuring them that the medicines are safe and very effective if they take them early and keep taking them during the pollen season."

The justification for early action is that certain cells in the body called "mast cells" contain histamine, which is a hormone/chemical transmitter. When an allergen is inhaled, antibodies attach themselves to mast cells in the nose, triggering the release of histamine. It is the histamine that causes the swelling and sets off sneezing, itching and mucus production. The idea is, if you get in with your antihistamines before the mast cells have been triggered, you can stop the whole allergic reaction before it starts.

Keeping an eye on the pollen count is a good way of deciding when to start treatment, or make a note of when your symptoms start this year to get ahead of them (by a week or two) next year. If your symptoms continue all year around (called allergic rhinitis) you should ask your GP about tests to find out which allergens you are sensitive to.

## Heading off HAY FEVER

Nearly one in five of us suffers from hay fever, but Louise Atkinson reports that new thinking about prevention can save a summer of misery



### HELP YOURSELF

- Be aware of pollen counts and minimise outdoor activity, if you can, when the count is high.
- Pollen particles rise and fall during the day, passing "irritating nose level" at 11am and 6pm.
- A heavy rain shower may wash pollen away, but a light shower will cause pollen grains to pop, releasing protein molecules that penetrate deeper into the nose creating extreme irritation.
- Minimise contact with pollen by wearing lightly fitting sunglasses; on bad days put on a nose and mouth mask (from DIY shops).
- When you come inside, consider showering, washing hair and changing clothes or try a High Efficiency Particulate Arresting (HEPA) air filter, about £100 from www.allergymatters.com.

### OVER THE COUNTER REMEDIES

The most popular remedies are nasal sprays and eye drops. But allergy specialists now recommend the majority of hayfever sufferers certainly those who experience extreme symptoms for three or four weeks of the year take the latest non-drowsy antihistamines in tablet form to suppress all their symptoms in a one-a-day hit.

While all antihistamines are effective, some induce more drowsiness as they cross into the brain. Newer, non-sedating antihistamines (so-called second

generation antihistamines) on the market contain loratadine or fexofenadine, which does not cross into the brain and causes no drowsiness.

Nose sprays and eye drops can be used on top and intermittently throughout the year, but consult your pharmacist before mixing drugs.

**ANTIHISTAMINE TABLETS**  
Zirtek, £8.95 for 21 tablets  
Claritin Allergy Tablets, £9.99 for 21 tablets  
Boots Hay Fever Allergy Relief

All-day tablets, £2.99 for seven tablets

**EYE DROPS**  
Opticrom, £3.99 for 5ml  
Boots Hay Fever Relief Eye Drops, £4.39 for 10ml

**NASAL SPRAYS**  
Flixonase Allergy, £6.79 for 60 sprays  
Becanase, £9.99 for 180 sprays  
Boots Nasal Spray, £4.39 for 100 sprays  
Aler-eye, £6.15 for 5ml (contains azelastine hydrochloride)

### What to get from your GP

- **GPs can prescribe** new antihistamines (branded as Telfast) as well as nose sprays (branded as Livostin/Flixonase) and eye drops, all of which work the same way as over the counter (OTC) remedies, but it may be cheaper for you to get a season's worth on one prescription.
- **If you suffer from itchy red, streaming eyes** that don't respond to OTC treatments, ask your GP about new prescription-only eye drops (Oxatans) which contain a "mast cell stabiliser" and work on two, rather than four, applications a day.
- **If your symptoms are severe** and you're facing an important event such as exams, a driving test or wedding, a GP may prescribe steroid tablets but be aware that long-term use of steroids can lead to osteoporosis or weaken the immune system.
- **If nothing seems to work**, your GP may refer you to an allergy specialist. Ask if your local hospital is conducting any "Pollen Desensitisation Trials"

into the effectiveness of new forms of immunotherapy (as injections, under the tongue drops and tablets). Many of these are available in the US and Europe and must be subject to trials before they can be licensed for use in this country (see the BSAC website, right).

### What to get from a health shop

- Although few alternative remedies undergo clinical trials, some are prompting interest in the world of conventional medicine.
- **Butterbur** (also called petasites tablets) is a herbal remedy that has been shown to work better than a placebo in trials. It

contains petasin, which is believed to have anti-inflammatory properties and inhibits histamine. Costs around £10.99 for 60 capsules from health shops.

■ **Red onion extract** (or allium cepa) produces a streaming nose and runny eyes in healthy people. When given to a hay fever sufferer it can relieve symptoms. Available from homeopaths or with ephrasia and subalidia in Boots Alternatives Hay Fever Relief Tablets, £3.99 for 72 tablets.

■ **Nasarene** is a product that makes contact with the moisture in the nasal tract and turns into a thin gel. This mimics a natural mucus membrane, trapping airborne irritants as they enter. Costs £9.95 for 200 sprays from Boots and health food stores.

■ **Fevibion**, a licensed remedy containing ephedrine, liquorice (to stimulate immunity), eucalyptus, antiseptic, lemon, peppermint (which is cooling) and cloves (which are anti-inflammatory). Medic Herb Vapovent chewable tablets, £3.99 for 80 from chemists and health stores.

### Want to know more?

- It's National Allergy Week from 18 to 20 May, see [www.allergyuk.org](http://www.allergyuk.org).
- For details of Dr Morris's allergy clinics, see [www.allergy-clinics.co.uk](http://www.allergy-clinics.co.uk).
- For NHS allergy clinics in the UK, contact the allergy UK helpline on 01202-919800.
- For information on Desensitisation Immunotherapy clinics, contact the British Society for Allergy and Clinical Immunology on [www.bsaci.org](http://www.bsaci.org) web