

HAYFEVER IF YOU'RE DREADING THE SNEEZING SEASON, TRY TO TAKE ACTION BEFORE IT STARTS, WRITES **YVONNE GORDON**

We'll have a hay old time

The days are getting longer, birds are singing and flowers are blooming – but not everyone is thrilled that spring is here and summer's on the way. Anyone who suffers from hayfever might have started feeling the effects of tree pollen already and some are dreading the appearance of grass pollen in a few weeks' time.

Hayfever can feel like a permanent head cold – coughing, sneezing, a runny, blocked or itchy nose, itchy eyes, ears and throat and headaches. Every year, one in ten people in Ireland suffers from it and symptoms can last all summer, or with some people, all year.

The condition, also known as allergic rhinitis, is caused by an allergic reaction to pollen – the tiny particles released by trees, grasses

and flowers – and spores, which come from fungi and moulds. It's usually seasonal and although different types of pollen and spores can trigger it, grass pollen is the most common cause.

This takes to the air from May to August, peaking in June and July. Other allergens like dust mites, certain animals and foods can cause an allergic reaction similar to hayfever, called perennial rhinitis.

Dear Diary

But there's no reason to go around feeling miserable – you can minimise both your exposure and your symptoms. The first thing to do is work out what is causing the problem – keep a diary of your symptoms and when they occur. If symptoms appear in spring and summer, it's probably hayfever; if they are year-round, it might be an

allergy to something else, according to Dr Brendan Fitzpatrick, a doctor with a special interest in allergies and complementary medicine.

Fitzpatrick, whose treatment methods include conventional medicine, homeopathic medicine and acupuncture, says that treatment depends on symptoms, but it's better to begin it before the hayfever season kicks in. 'If you've got symptoms of runny nose, watery eyes and a lot of itching and sneezing, anti-histamines work well. If nose-blockage and congestion is your main problem, you'll need something like local steroids or medicated drops,' he says.

Sense of season

'Some people are wary about using steroids, so they might use

homeopathic herbal medicines. De-sensitisation can also work very well,' he adds. De-sensitisation happens when drops of diluted grass pollen extract are put

under a person's tongue. It's done before the season and if done over a few seasons, can have long term benefits.

Acupuncture has also been proven to help. 'If someone only gets a six-week bad period and the nose is the main problem, acupuncture can be useful. It makes the nose less reactive for that period,' he says.

Hayfever has only been around for the last 100 years or so and medical statistics show that it's rising. This can be due to changes in our environment (such as pollution) or in how our bodies react to these. 'I've no doubt that allergies in general are increasing,' says Dr Fitzpatrick.



Nosebag: Hayfever has only been around for the last 100 years and statistics show that it's rising

'Hayfever is part of the same family as asthma and asthma has increased dramatically,' he says. 'Sometimes hayfever can be an isolated problem. Other times it can be part of an overall dust mite or mould allergy. There's no one treatment for everybody but there's lots that can be done.'

For information on managing hayfever, you can download a booklet 'Asthma And Allergic Rhinitis' from www.asthmasociety.ie, or order it on 1850 44 54 64.

Dr Brendan Fitzpatrick can be contacted via www.allergy.ie

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TIPS ON AVOIDING POLLEN

Outdoors:

- Check the pollen forecast before you go out.
- Try to avoid going out at times of day when the pollen count is highest i.e. mid-morning and the period from late afternoon to early evening.
- Keep away from long grass, parks and fields.
- Avoid cutting the grass or gardening.
- Holidaying beside sea is better than inland.
- Try not to dry clothes outside, or if you do, shake them well before bringing in.
- Wear covering sunglasses and splash eyes with cold water to flush out pollen.
- Putting Vaseline around the nostrils can prevent irritation.



Indoors:

- Keep house and car windows closed during the pollen season.
- Keep dust to a minimum.
- If you have to go out, shower and change your clothes afterwards.
- Pets can carry pollen indoors, so wash them regularly.
- Avoid smoky environments, which can make symptoms worse.

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