HAY FEVER OR SEASONAL ALLERGY

What is Hay fever?
Hay fever is a respiratory allergy that usually occurs in the spring, summer or fall. Also called seasonal allergic rhinitis, hay fever is a reaction caused by inhaling certain airborne particles to which you are allergic. Hay fever is more common in people who have other allergies such as asthma and dermatitis and in those who have relatives with allergies. Hay fever can develop or disappear suddenly and at any time.

What causes hay fever?
The air carries particles to which some of us are allergic to. When we inhale these airborne particles, called allergens, our body responds by releasing a chemical called “histamine”. Histamine actually causes the symptoms we associate with hay fever.

What are the symptoms of hay fever?
Histamine makes the lining of your eyes, eyelids, sinuses and nose swell. Other symptoms may include:
- nasal congestion
- runny nose
- itchy eyes, nose and throat
- headaches
- coughing
- wheezing
- trouble sleeping
- violent and repeated sneezing

What are some common airborne allergens?
Grass, tree, flower and weed pollens, as well as mould spores are known to trigger seasonal hay fever.

How can I know what’s causing my hay fever?
If you think you have an allergy, you should talk to your doctor about allergy testing. Identifying your allergens is key in addressing the irritation they cause. Your health care provider will usually be able to diagnose hay fever from your medical history and a physical exam.

For most people, hay fever is merely a seasonal nuisance. If it interferes with your life in a major way, however, you may want to see an allergist. An allergist can do tests to find out which airborne substances cause you the most problems.

Can I have hay fever more than once a year?
Yes – different allergens (pollens and mould spores) are released at different times in the year, and your hay fever symptoms will follow their release. If you have several allergens that are released at different times, you will experience symptoms of hay fever in more than one season. In general:
- Tree pollens are released from mid-March – early June
- Grass pollens are released from June – early August
- Weed pollens are released from September – November
- Mould spores are released in early spring, and late summer/early fall

What can I do to reduce symptoms of hay fever?
If warmer weather heralds sneezing, sniffling and itchy eyes, these tips will help minimize your suffering.
Know what sets you off. Pollen is the number one cause of seasonal allergies. If your symptoms are worst in the spring, you likely react to tree pollen; if you suffer more in summer and fall, then grass and weed pollen are likely the culprits.

Check the pollen count. You can reduce your symptoms by avoiding spending too much time outside when the pollen count is high. Visit www.theweathernetwork.ca to find your local pollen index.

Allergies make asthma worse. “Remember not to stop your asthma medications in spring and summer,” says Dr. Sheldon Spier, associate professor of pediatrics at the University of Calgary and medical director of the Calgary Pediatric Asthma Service.

Spend your mornings indoors. Pollen counts are higher before noon. If the blue skies and fresh air are too strong to resist, at least limit your time outside in the morning.

Avoid too much time on the grass where mould is present, including playing sports because snow mould can trigger allergies, and be a real problem for asthma sufferers.

“Do not cut the grass yourself,” says Spier. If allergies are an issue, pass the mowing duties to someone else.

Leave pollen outside. While it is not as sticky as some other allergens, pollen can travel indoors on clothes, skin, hair and on pets. Spier advises taking coats and shoes off before coming indoors. Wash your hands thoroughly, and you can even rinse out your eyes and nose.

Don’t use the clothesline. As nice as sun-dried clothes can be, they can be covered in allergens. Outdoor toys and bikes are also best stored in a garage or shed.

Choose floral arrangements carefully. A vase of flowers is a great way to bring spring indoors, but you’ll want to avoid pollen-heavy flowers. Such flowers often have a hairy stem or leave a residue of pollen — either dust or stickiness — on your fingers when touched.

Watch for indoor allergens. Heading inside should be an escape for seasonal allergy sufferers, but only if indoor allergens are kept to a minimum. Keep windows closed and be aware of any reaction to pet dander or dust that may be making your seasonal allergies worse. Want more information on how to improve air quality? For information on kids and asthma, visit ucalgary.ca/icancontrolasthma.

How can you tell a common cold from allergy symptoms?
Seasonal allergies and the common cold have one major thing in common: their symptoms. There are some tell tale signs help you identify which one you are suffering from.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Symptom</th>
<th>Is it an allergy?</th>
<th>Is it a cold?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cough</td>
<td>Rarely cause coughing</td>
<td>Coughs are common</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sneezing</td>
<td>Sneezing is common</td>
<td>Sneezing is common</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fever</td>
<td>Fever is unusual</td>
<td>Rarely causes fever</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nasal discharge</td>
<td>Watery and clear</td>
<td>Thick and coloured</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Duration of symptoms</td>
<td>Weeks to months</td>
<td>Usually a week</td>
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Where can I get more information?
To learn more, contact your doctor or speak to a nurse 24 hours a day, seven days a week by calling: Alberta Health Link toll free at 1-866-408-LINK (5465). Mandarin Health Link Calgary at 403-943-1554, Cantonese Health Link Calgary at 403-943-1556

Sources: Seasonal Allergies, E-Health Info, Alberta Health Services, Apple Magazine, Alberta Health Services

If you want to read any of the previous ‘Road to Healthy Living’ series articles, please go to http://www.albertahealthservices.ca/4248.asp and get health information in your own language.