

Hayfever

Hayfever causes itchy, red, swollen eyes, and sneezy, runny, stuffy, itchy nose, especially in April, May, and June due to allergy to pollen. Trees pollinate as early as January and weeds pollinate as late as September, but it is in late spring when the especially troublesome grass pollen is most abundant. It is spread into the air from the hills as they turn from green to brown (and especially when the grass is being cut for hay). The pollen carries especially well on warm, windy days.

Avoidance Measures

It is impossible to completely avoid pollen during certain times of the year without becoming an indoor recluse or leaving for a desert island. However the following measures can be of some help.

1. Be prudent about how much time is spent outdoors, especially on warm, windy days. Keep windows and doors closed in the home (ideally with an airconditioner on).
2. Wash hands and face after being outdoors to keep pollen away from the eyes and nose.
3. Bathe at the end of the day to wash off unwanted pollen so that it won't be brought to the bed and pillow.

Medications

1. Mild Symptoms

Antihistamine and decongestant pills are usually best for mild symptoms. Loratadine (the generic version of Claritin) is the most widely used antihistamine for daytime use and helps relieve itching, sneezing and runny nose. It is popular because it is extremely unlikely to cause drowsiness. Chlorpheniramine (the generic version of Chlortrimeton) is stronger but more likely to cause drowsiness. For this reason it is usually taken at night. For maximum relief, many patients take loratadine in the morning and chlorpheniramine at night.

Pseudoephedrine (Sudafed) is a decongestant and helps relieve stuffy nose and sinus and ear congestion. Its most common side effect is nervousness or insomnia. For this reason, many patients take it in the daytime only. Pseudoephedrine can also increase blood pressure and so must be used with caution in people with heart disease or high blood pressure.

Pseudoephedrine can be taken alone or together with either loratadine or chlorpheniramine, depending on which symptoms are bothersome. All three are inexpensive and available at Kaiser pharmacies.

2. Severe Symptoms

For more bothersome symptoms, stronger medications are indicated. Two such medicines are especially effective because they are applied directly on the affected surfaces of the eyes and nose. As a result they tend to work well with little or no side effects.

Cortisone nosesprays (Nasarel, Flonase, Nasonex, Beconase AQ, Rhinocort) work well to treat itchy, sneezy, runny, stuffy nose, and associated symptoms such as postnasal drip, sinus headache and itchy throat. Despite the fact that they are steroid based preparations, they are extremely safe because they are designed to work locally and are essentially free of any effect beyond the nasal tissue. Their only local side effect is nosebleeds (rare). If these occur, stop the medicine and discuss them with your doctor before resuming. They are available only by prescription.

Cortisone nosesprays work slowly. It is only after a week or so of regular use that they reach their peak effect. Therefore, they should be taken regularly 1-2 times a day through the season eg. April through June, even when symptoms are absent to prevent allergies.

Opcon-A eyedrops help itchy, tearing, swollen, red eyes instantly and are best taken as needed. They should not be used with contact lenses. They are available over the counter and are inexpensive at Kaiser pharmacies.

For most patients with severe symptoms, regular use of a cortisone nosespray combined with as needed Opcon-A, loratadine, chlorpheniramine, and pseudoephedrine work extremely well.

Allergy Shots

In especially severe cases, even these measures are ineffective, and it is necessary to consider allergy shots. Unfortunately, it takes 6 months to a year of weekly injections for the shots to take effect, and they must be continued throughout the year to maintain their effect. They need to be taken for several years in general. For this reason, most people prefer to try medication first.