Pollen and Hay Fever FAQs

What's causing my symptoms?

1) Why have I been getting hay fever since January but the pollen season doesn’t start until April?

Some people are allergic to early flowering trees such as hazel and alder which start producing pollen from January until late March. The main tree pollen season (mainly birch and then oak pollen) affects more sufferers and runs from late March until early June. The grass pollen season overlaps with the main tree pollen season and runs from late April to late May.

2) Do I have a cold or could it be hay fever?

The symptoms of a cold would be less likely to coincide with the pollen seasons and should be over in a week or two. Typical symptoms of hay fever include excessive sneezing, runny nose, itchy eyes and an itchy throat and palate and usually occur outside and in episodes. After going indoors and closing the doors and windows, the symptoms should start to subside but will often be followed by nasal congestion and possibly a sore throat, headache and irritability. Make a note of when you get symptoms and compare that to the pollen forecast for your area or check out our pollen calendar. Alternatively, visit your GP for a diagnosis if you have these symptoms for more than a couple of weeks.

3) I get hay fever-type symptoms all year, not just during the pollen seasons – what could be affecting me?

There are a number of possibilities: (a) Fungal spores (b) House dust mites (c) Pet allergies, e.g. cat, dog, guinea pig, horse (d) Tobacco smoke (e) Chemical irritant e.g. chlorine, combustion products such as vehicle exhaust, fumes from scented candles, ozone from photocopiers, Volatile Organic Compounds (VOCs) from cleaning products, room fresheners, office supplies and off-gassing from furniture and building materials; (f) Temperature and humidity extremes.

4) I’m only allergic to grass pollen but I’m suffering from hay fever and the grass pollen forecast says ‘Low’ – why?

There are two possibilities: either you are being affected by a non-allergenic irritant, such as those listed in 3. above, or a few grass types have started flowering and you are being affected even at low levels. Hay fever sufferers can vary in their reactions to allergens. Some people are affected by low concentrations of pollen in the atmosphere or are only affected for part of the season. Others may only suffer on high count days or start their symptoms in response to later flowering grass types.

Pollen avoidance

1) Are there times of day that have higher pollen levels?

2) Is there anywhere in Britain where I can completely avoid pollen?

3) Where can I go on holiday to avoid grass pollen?

Reducing symptoms

1) What can I do to avoid getting hay fever?

2) I’ve heard that eating local honey can help – is that true?

Miscellaneous questions:

1) There’s yellow dust all over my car – is it pollen?

2) There’s white fluff coming in through my windows – is it pollen?

3) Could oil-seed rape pollen be giving me symptoms?
Pollen Avoidance

1) Are there times of day that have higher pollen levels?

On a typical high count day (dry, warm and sunny) in the main grass pollen season, the risk is greatest in the first half of the morning and again from about 4pm in the afternoon until late evening. This risk can continue all night if temperatures remain elevated, particularly in the cities of the south. During the tree pollen season, the risk is usually during daylight hours only.

2) Is there anywhere in Britain where I can completely avoid pollen?

In short, not really. However, there are places where there may be very little pollen at times such as western and northern beaches with an onshore wind blowing.

3) Where can I go on holiday to avoid grass pollen?

In the UK, there are areas that have fewer high count days, lower pollen counts generally and a shorter pollen season. However, you won’t be able to avoid pollen altogether (see 1. above). Head for the Scottish Highlands and Islands and the far North of Scotland where the grass pollen season occurs in late June and early July. If you are allergic to tree pollen as well, avoid these Scottish areas in the Spring. Most importantly, avoid the Central and Southern regions of the UK where the worst pollen levels occur and the season is long. For holidays abroad, check out our list of low pollen holiday destinations but make sure you pack your hay fever remedies just in case something does affect you.

Reducing Symptoms

1) What can I do to avoid getting hay fever?

There are plenty of measures that you can take, some of which will involve some trial and error as not all the recommendations work for everyone. Individual responses to pollen and the treatments vary greatly.

- Start off by getting an accurate diagnosis from your GP who will also suggest treatments, typically antihistamines, nasal sprays and eye drops. If the treatment doesn’t help much you may need to try others before you find one that suits you.
- Your local pharmacist can also advise you on the various treatments available.
- Try to start taking medication or other treatments several weeks before the start of the pollen season – have a look at the pollen calendar to help you with this.
- If you cannot have antihistamines, there are lots of different treatments on the market that you can try. For example, there are barrier sprays and creams which help to keep pollen out of the nose or help to stop it reaching the sensitive cells within the nose. There are light therapy devices which are used to reduce the reaction in the nose and there is a wide range of herbal remedies.
- Check out the pollen forecast - both daily and weekly forecasts are available.

2) I’ve heard that eating local honey can help – is that true?

Some people eat local honey each day before and during the pollen season. There is no available scientific research that proves that this helps although many people claim it works for them.

Miscellaneous Questions

1) There’s yellow dust all over my car – is it pollen?

Most likely, yes it is. In the UK, this will probably be tree pollen from pine trees and will typically occur in April. However, it can also come from other evergreen trees such as cypress and cedar. Cypress trees release their pollen intermittently throughout the year, depending on the species. Cedar trees typically release their pollen in the autumn and into December. Most people in the UK are not affected by these pollen types.

2) There’s white fluff coming in through my windows – is it pollen?

No, it isn’t. It’s the seeds from either willow or poplar trees. These trees produce the fluff to help their seeds float away.

3) Could Oil-seed rape pollen be giving me symptoms?

Around one in 25 hay fever sufferers test positive to Oil-seed rape pollen and could therefore get hay fever type symptoms from it. The main problem with oil-seed rape is that the crops emit volatile organic compounds (VOCs) which can trigger a variety of non-allergic symptoms in the upper respiratory tract.