



Health Notes

from the Lilydale Pharmacy

Hayfever

Hayfever is often thought of as a trivial condition – just a sniffle and a sneeze. In fact, for the hayfever sufferer, the impact on quality of life can be enormous, and the economic effects are significant too.

Medically speaking, hayfever is known as allergic rhinitis. Rhinitis literally means inflammation of the nasal passages; but this description is not really an adequate indication of the havoc that hayfever can cause.

The allergic inflammatory process doesn't stop at the nose. The symptoms of hayfever are many and varied. Typically they include sneezing, a clear nasal discharge, watery, itchy eyes, itchy throat, blocked nose and, not surprisingly, lack of energy. Headache sometimes occurs and the sense of smell can also be affected. While none of these symptoms would appear to be life threatening, they can certainly have a serious adverse effect on the productivity of work or study, and destroy the enjoyment of leisure activities.

Hayfever is a global health problem. It affects about 25% of the world's population. In Australia the situation is even worse, with about 40% of adults in this country showing allergy symptoms – usually allergic rhinitis. This makes hayfever the most common chronic condition for people consulting their doctor.

Hayfever can be classified as *intermittent*, where symptoms occur only now and again and *persistent* where the symptoms are evident for more than four weeks a year or four days a week. Hayfever is further divided into *mild or moderate to severe*. In the latter case work, school or leisure activities are impaired or sleep is disturbed. This way of describing hayfever symptoms is especially useful in Australia where the spring and summer allergy "season" can extend from August through to March and our mild weather enables the house dust mite (a likely trigger factor for hayfever) to live happily with us throughout the year.

Oral antihistamines are particularly helpful. The older antihistamines like *Polaramine*, *Zadine* and *Phenergan* are effective but can cause drowsiness in some people. The newer antihistamines such as *Claratyne*, *Telfast* and *Zyrtec* are more popular as they don't cause drowsiness and can be taken once a day.

Decongestant tablets like *Sudafed* are often used but they can elevate blood pressure and keep people awake. Decongestants are more effective when used in combination with an antihistamine. There are many of these medications available, including *Demazin*, *Sinutab* and some Chemist Own brands. If a runny nose is the main problem, the antihistamine nasal spray *Azep* is a useful alternative. This can be used intermittently when it is needed.

For moderate to severe and persistent runny noses and blocked noses, the intra-nasal corticosteroid sprays are the best option. Products in this category include *Beconase* and *Rhinocort*. These nasal sprays must be used every day to maintain their effectiveness, but take a few days of use before they begin to work. They are safe to use for several months continuously if needed.

Decongestant sprays like *Nasex* or *Sinex* can be helpful over a short period. The problem with these sprays is 'rebound congestion' which will occur if the spray is used for more than 5 days in a row. When using any nasal spray, it should be aimed towards the ear, and not straight up. If you can taste it then the spray is not going to the right place.

For itchy eyes, antihistamine eye drops are effective but sometimes make the eyes sting. *Naphcon A* is very good.

Severe hayfever will need a doctor's assistance.