

SOMETHING IN THE AIR

Watery eyes, blocked nose, sneezing – the symptoms of hayfever are familiar to many of us. But what actually happens in the body when an allergic response occurs?

After a long winter the emergence of spring is usually a welcome change. Unfortunately, all the new grass, new leaves and blossoming flowers also result in an increase of pollen in the air, which for many people means one thing: hayfever.

Allergic rhinitis, or hayfever as it is commonly known, is one of the most common chronic respiratory conditions in Australia. According to a 2011 Australian Institute of Health and Welfare report, it affects around 15% of the Australian population, or about 3.1 million people. It is most common among people aged 25-44 years and, for reasons unknown, is more often reported by females than males.

If you suffer from hayfever, it can be helpful to understand what actually happens in the body when this allergic response occurs. An allergic reaction is really an over-reaction of the immune system to an ordinarily harmless substance. In the case of hayfever, the allergen is usually light, dry airborne particles such as pollen, house dust, animal fur, fungal spores and other air pollutants.

When an allergic person breathes

KNOW YOUR ANTIHISTAMINES

So what products should you be looking for? There are several popular antihistamines that have been shown to provide prompt relief for many hayfever sufferers. Generic versions of popular branded antihistamines are also available, which means hayfever treatment is more affordable for more people.

These drugs are just as effective as the branded versions and contain exactly the same active ingredients.

in one or more of these substances, it stimulates the immune system's B cells, a type of white blood cell that produces a large number of antibodies called immunoglobulin E (or IgE) to attack the allergen. Everyone has these antibodies, but an allergic person has an oversupply. These antibodies then travel through the body and attach to mast cells – immune cells found in the digestive system, respiratory system and skin – waiting for you to come into contact with the pollen again.

The next time (and all subsequent times) the allergen enters the body, the antibodies attached to the mast cells recognise it and bind to it. When this happens, the mast cells

Popular second-generation antihistamines such as **fexofenadine**, **cetirizine** and **loratadine** generally bring some relief in one to three hours, and continue to work for 12 to 24 hours for most people. These medications are all available over the counter and have little or no drowsiness effect. However, different people respond differently to each antihistamine, so if one doesn't work for you, it's well worth giving another a try.

release some powerful chemical substances, including histamine, into the tissues and blood. For many people, the effects of histamine can be very painful and irritating, causing itching, swelling and fluid leaking from the cells.

"There's an irritation to the lining of the nasal passages and sometimes to the lining of the eyes, or the conjunctiva, which leads

to the swelling of these particular membranes," GP Dr Brian Sando says. "You get an outpouring of fluids and secretions from the nose and eyes, which can also produce sneezing and often a sore throat, because, as the nose is blocked, they're breathing through their mouth more."

While more serious reactions such as breathing difficulties can occur, for most people the symptoms of hayfever are not severe and effective treatment is available. "The best prevention is to try to avoid the allergen, but of course

that's not always possible," Dr Sando says. In most cases, over-the-counter medication provides prompt relief.

"Antihistamines are the first thing you should try because they tend to settle down the allergic reaction in most people," Dr Sando advises. "People who are supersensitive will go to see an allergist who can conduct a desensitising process, but antihistamines are usually the first response."

Antihistamines block the effects of the histamine (rather than actually stop its production)

and are often very effective at reducing swelling and relieving the runny nose, watery eyes and itching. In the past, medications now known as first-generation antihistamines had a strong sedative effect that limited their usefulness, particularly for people who drive or operate machinery. These days, second-generation, non-drowsy antihistamines are available, making treatment much more convenient. "These antihistamines work very effectively for a large number of people without that sedative effect," Dr Sando explains. ●

HELPLINES



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\$28.99, members \$23.19
Claratyne (30 tablets)
\$29.99, members \$23.99
Telfast 180mg (30 tablets)
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