

# Spring Allergies

Spring is the time of year that we normally think of when it comes to seasonal allergies. As the trees start to bloom and the pollen gets airborne, allergy sufferers begin their annual ritual of sniffing and sneezing. Each year, 35 million Americans fall prey to seasonal allergic rhinitis, more commonly known as hay fever.

Although there is no magical cure for spring allergies, there are a number of ways to combat them, from medication to household habits.

## What causes spring allergies?

The biggest spring allergy trigger is pollen -- tiny grains released into the air by trees, grasses, and weeds for the purpose of fertilizing other plants. When pollen grains get into the nose of someone who's allergic, they send the immune system into overdrive.

The immune system, mistakenly seeing the pollen as foreign invaders, releases antibodies -- substances that normally identify and attack bacteria, viruses, and other illness-causing organisms. The antibodies attack the allergens, which leads to the release of chemicals called histamines into the blood. Histamines trigger the runny nose, itchy eyes, and other symptoms of allergies.

Allergy symptoms tend to be particularly high on breezy days when the wind picks up pollen and carries it through the air. Rainy days, on the other hand, cause a drop in the pollen counts because the rain washes away the allergens.

## What are the symptoms of spring allergies?

Spring allergy symptoms include:

Runny nose    Watery eyes    Sneezing/Coughing    Itchy eyes and nose    Dark circles under the eyes

Airborne allergens also can trigger asthma, a condition in which the airways narrow, making breathing difficult and leading to coughing, wheezing, and shortness of breath.

## How are spring allergies diagnosed?

If you've never been formally diagnosed with allergies but you notice that your eyes and nose are itchy and runny during the spring months, see your doctor. Your doctor may refer you to an allergist for tests.

The allergy specialist may do a skin test, which involves injecting a tiny sample of a diluted allergen just under the skin of your arm or back. If you're allergic to the substance, a small red bump will form.

## How to manage spring allergies

It's nearly impossible to completely avoid allergies if you live in an area where plants grow. However, you can ease sniffing, sneezing, and watery eyes by avoiding your main allergy triggers. Here are a few tips.

Try to stay indoors whenever the pollen count is very high (pollen counts usually peak in the mornings).

Keep your doors and windows closed whenever possible during the spring months to keep allergens out. An air purifier may also help.

Clean the air filters in your home often. Also, clean bookshelves, vents, and other places where pollen can collect.

Wash your hair after going outside, because pollen can collect there.

Vacuum twice a week. Wear a mask because vacuuming can kick up pollen, mold, and dust that were trapped in your carpet.