

Supporting Training Initiatives



the otc treatment clinic

Common conditions and their treatment options



This module has been endorsed with the NPA's Training Seal as suitable for use by medicines counter assistants as part of their ongoing learning. Complete the questions at the end to include in your self-development portfolio



Welcome to *TM's* OTC Treatment Clinic series. This handy, four-page section is specially designed so that you can detach it from the magazine and keep it for future reference.

Each month, *TM* covers a different OTC treatment area to help you keep up-to-date with the latest product developments. In this issue, we focus on hayfever. At the end of the module there are multiple choice questions for you to complete, so your progress can be monitored by your pharmacist.

You can find out more in the *Counter Intelligence Plus* training guide.

The last six topics we have covered are:

- Ovulation and pregnancy testing
- Smoking cessation
- Oral care
- Daily fatigue and stress
- Coughs
- Sore throats

You can download previous modules from:
www.tm-modules.co.uk

module 205 Hayfever

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for this module

OBJECTIVES: After studying this module, assistants will:

- Understand the prevalence of hayfever and the effect it can have on a sufferer's quality of life
- Be familiar with the symptoms of hayfever and how these differ from the common cold
- Understand how pollen causes hayfever and the factors that determine pollen levels
- Be able to advise on the range of OTC treatments available and know which options will suit different sufferers
- Be able to advise customers on how to get the best out of their treatment choices.

Allergic conditions are common problems, with hayfever (an allergy to pollen) being one of the most prevalent. For most people, pollen is a harmless substance they don't give much thought to. But for the estimated 18 million people in the UK who suffer from hayfever, the arrival of spring and flowers in bloom is a time they dread.

The UK allergy remedies market is huge, and is worth an estimated £117 million. However, many sufferers are not benefitting from their treatment and/or they may be using it incorrectly. New research commissioned by Allergy UK reveals that 62 per cent of hayfever sufferers find their current hayfever medication to be ineffective. In addition, only four per cent say their medication actually eliminates symptoms, while for the majority (60 per cent), it only makes their hayfever bearable.

The results from Allergy UK also reveal that of

the 39 per cent of sufferers who use a steroid nasal spray, only 14 per cent are using it correctly. This means that for 86 per cent of patients, their nasal spray will not work properly. The findings also show that many hayfever patients are not taking their medication as instructed by the prescriber. Worryingly, 19 per cent of sufferers said that if their medication wasn't working, they would carry on taking it regardless, while a further 13 per cent would simply increase the dosage.

The release of these new findings coincided with the recent Allergy Awareness Week (28 April-4 May), which pinpointed the misuse of hayfever medication as a major cause of suffering. The campaign urged sufferers to talk to their pharmacist about reviewing their medication and improving their nasal spray technique. Therefore, regular sufferers may start coming into the

reflective exercise

Wendy, 38, tells you that she suffers from hayfever every summer for several weeks. Her main symptoms include itchy eyes, a blocked nose and sneezing. She tells you she works in a coffee shop, where she is constantly interacting with customers, so she wants to be well prepared and get her symptoms under control before the start of the hayfever season.

What would you recommend?

Corticosteroid nasal sprays are effective against all of Wendy's symptoms, and are useful for people who suffer from allergies each year for long periods of time.

Ask Wendy when her symptoms typically start as the spray can take several days to be effective, so she may need to start using it a couple of weeks earlier. The spray should then be used daily, regardless of whether Wendy has hayfever symptoms or not.

What if:

Wendy tells you that she has a nine-year-old son, Peter, who also suffers from hayfever. She asks whether the corticosteroid nasal spray would be suitable for him.

Corticosteroid nasal sprays are suitable from the age of 18 years, so should not be given to Peter. Instead, recommend a drug-free nasal spray or eye drops containing sodium cromoglicate, which can be used as his symptoms start.

What if:

Wendy is also interested in hearing about barrier products against pollen.

pharmacy seeking advice on the different types of treatments available or to learn how to get the best out of their medication.

Being aware of the symptoms and treatment options for hayfever should be a priority for pharmacy teams during the warmer months, particularly as many people also confuse the symptoms with a cold.

Hayfever: the facts

Hayfever is a common allergic reaction that affects up to one in five people at some point in their lives, according to NHS Choices. The condition is more common in boys than girls, but affects adult men and women equally. It is also more likely to affect those with a family

history of allergic conditions, particularly asthma or eczema. These susceptible individuals are sometimes described as 'atopic', meaning that they have an inherited predisposition that makes them more likely to develop an allergic disorder at some point in their lives.

What if:

One month later, Wendy returns to the pharmacy saying that Peter is a little wheezy and is coughing during the night.

Refer Peter to the pharmacist. These symptoms may indicate seasonal asthma, which often occurs with hayfever.

What if:

Wendy mentions that she has agreed to look after a friend's dog, but is worried that the dog may bring pollen into the house.

Recommend that Wendy vacuums the house at least once a day – she could try a vacuum cleaner specifically designed to remove dog hairs and dust. However, these are expensive. All surfaces should be dusted daily with a damp cloth. Scrubbing floors, including carpets, with a damp cloth can also be effective.

Pets should not be allowed in bedrooms and, if possible, should be restricted to one area of the house.

Suggest that Wendy looks up the pollen count each day and plans to walk the dog when the counts are lower. It's also important to wash and brush the dog regularly to remove pollen from its fur.

Hayfever rates are on the rise and, according to Allergy UK, symptoms are now appearing for the first time at any age, not just during childhood or teenage years, for reasons which experts can't fully explain. Some believe that climate change could play a role, as rising carbon dioxide levels may make plants grow more efficiently and produce more pollen. Others think that cleaner lifestyles could be to blame as our

immune systems encounter fewer germs and therefore overreact to non-harmful substances like pollen. Increased urbanisation and air pollution have also been suggested as being potentially responsible.

Whatever the cause, there is no doubt that hayfever can have a significant impact on a sufferer's quality of life. According to NHS Choices, a third of adults with hayfever say that their symptoms have a considerable negative impact on their work, home and social life, while child sufferers often find that their symptoms impact on their schooling, which can delay their learning and development. The Allergy UK report *The Missing Link* states that many teenage allergy sufferers will drop at least one grade in their exams because of their allergy.

What is hayfever?
The correct medical name for hayfever is 'seasonal allergic rhinitis'. In other words, it's an allergic condition that varies in prevalence depending on the time of year. In order to understand this minor ailment, it helps to consider what is meant by the term 'allergy'.

What is hayfever?

An allergy develops when the body's immune system reacts to a trigger (an allergen) as though it were harmful, like an infection. In the case of hayfever, the allergen is the pollen produced by plants, including grass, trees and weeds.

For most people, pollen is harmless and exposure to it doesn't cause any health issues. But for those with hayfever, contact with pollen triggers the body to react as if it were under attack. An immune response launches and the body releases a type of antibody (IgE) to attack the allergen. The immune system then releases numerous chemicals, including histamine, to prevent the spread of what it perceives to be an infection.

Of course pollen isn't the only thing that can cause an allergic reaction. Almost anything can be an allergen for someone. Common allergens include house dust mites, mould and pets. Less common allergens include nuts, fruit and latex.

In addition, some people find that their allergy symptoms are made worse by exposure to things like aerosol sprays; pollution; extremes of temperature and humidity; and tobacco or wood smoke. These are not common allergens in themselves, but may exacerbate symptoms.

Common symptoms

The symptoms of an allergic reaction can vary widely from person to person. For some, sneezing and a runny nose may be as bad as it gets; for others, an allergy can be a serious, life-threatening condition. Common symptoms include:



- Sneezing
- Runny nose or nasal congestion
- Coughing
- Itchy eyes, ears, nose or mouth
- Sinus pain
- Swelling
- Wheezing or shortness of breath
- Urticaria (nettle rash or hives)
- Sickness, vomiting, diarrhoea.

Anaphylactic shock is a very rare, severe form of allergic reaction that can be life-threatening if it is not treated immediately. During this type of reaction, the whole body reacts to the allergen, usually within a few minutes of coming into contact with it. Symptoms may include difficulty swallowing, speaking or breathing; swelling of the throat and mouth; a rash anywhere on the body; red or itchy skin; stomach cramps, nausea and vomiting; a sudden feeling of weakness; and collapse and unconsciousness.

The most common cause of anaphylactic shock is an allergy to insect stings, certain medication such as antibiotics, nuts or other types of food (e.g. milk or seafood). An immediate injection of adrenalin into the muscles will help, and sufferers who know they are susceptible should carry an auto-injection kit with them just in case.

When to refer

Refer to your pharmacist anyone who:

- Has never suffered from hayfever before
- Is pregnant or breastfeeding
- Is taking other medication
- Is asthmatic
- Isn't having success with OTC treatments or is suffering unacceptable side-effects
- Reports wheezing, breathlessness or a feeling of tightness in the chest
- Complains of sinus or headache pain, and/or a yellow or green nasal discharge. This could be a sign of a sinus infection
- Has a fever.

Is it a cold or an allergy?

A study by Allergy UK revealed that 64 per cent of participants were confused about whether they were suffering from a cold or an allergy. While these conditions do share some common symptoms, particularly sneezing and a runny nose, there are specific signs that can help determine what the problem is:

Symptom	Cold	Allergy
Cough	Common	Occasionally
Muscle aches	Occasionally	Never
Itchy eyes	Rare/never	Common
Sore throat	Common	Occasionally
Fever	Occasionally	Never
Duration	3-14 days	Longer (weeks)



Research shows that 62 per cent of hayfever sufferers find their medication to be ineffective

Focus on pollen

Pollen is released by certain plants – particularly trees and grasses – as a way of reproducing. Pollen levels (known as the pollen count) vary with the time of year and the weather.

There are about 30 types of pollen that may trigger hayfever symptoms in susceptible individuals, and each type has its own unique size and structure. Someone may find they are allergic to grass pollen but not tree pollen, for example, and this will determine when they experience symptoms.

Generally speaking, tree pollen is released during spring – birch is a common culprit at this time of year. However, trees such as hazel and yew, for example, may cause symptoms as early as February, while oak pollen may persist into June.

Grass pollen is released during the end of spring and the beginning of summer and affects around 90 per cent of hayfever sufferers. Weed pollen, such as nettle, is released from early spring through to late autumn. Symptoms during the damp, cooler days of autumn may be triggered by mould and fungal spores rather than pollen.

In general, the higher the pollen count, the more troublesome hayfever symptoms will be. During the pollen season, plants release pollen early in the morning. However, on sunny days, the pollen count peaks in the early evening. The pollen count tends to be higher on humid days with a gentle breeze as this helps pollen to spread, while rain can wash pollen out of the air, bringing relief to sufferers. Many newspapers, weather forecasts and websites offer daily pollen counts during the main

self-care tips

The focus of this year's Allergy Awareness Week was encouraging sufferers to take their medication correctly. Allergy UK issued the following recommendations:

- Aim to start using preventative or treatment nasal sprays two weeks before symptoms normally start
- When using a steroid nasal spray, tip the head forward, look down and insert the nozzle so that it sprays towards the outside of the nose
- Seawater nasal sprays clean the nasal passages and wash away mucus. They can provide temporary relief from blocked noses and sinuses, and prime the nose for treatment
- Once-a-day medications don't cause drowsiness and so don't affect driving, concentration, work or social lives
- Nasal sprays that contain decongestants can be used on particularly bad days, but should not be used regularly as they can cause rebound congestion
- Moderate to severe cases can be prescribed a spray containing steroids and antihistamines, or stronger eye drops
- Antihistamines can vary in effectiveness from person-to-person, therefore customers should expect to have to try several treatment options before finding the one that works best for them.



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hayfever season, and keeping track of these figures may help sufferers plan appropriate treatment.

OTC treatment options

Pharmacies offer a wide range of effective OTC hayfever treatments. Sufferers who previously haven't found relief with OTC treatments should consider reviewing their medication as there may be a more effective or suitable product available with fewer side-effects. OTC treatment choices can be divided into different groups based on their mode of action:

● Antihistamines

As the name suggests, these products work by blocking the action of histamine, one of the chemicals released when a susceptible person encounters pollen. These products tend to start working quickly and can be taken as sufferers notice symptoms appearing, rather than on a daily basis.

Oral antihistamines are usually separated into two groups:

1. Older compounds – the most common example is chlorphenamine (e.g. Allercalm Allergy Relief, Piriton Allergy). This is a relatively non-specific antihistamine and one of its drawbacks is that it can cause drowsiness. Anyone buying these products should be warned of this, particularly if they are driving or operating machinery. Older antihistamines also have a shorter duration of action and so need to be taken more frequently (e.g. every four to six hours). However, these products are

often more affordable, which makes them appealing to some customers.

2. Newer compounds – examples include acrivastine (e.g. Benadryl Allergy Relief), cetirizine (e.g. Benadryl One A Day, Benadryl Allergy Oral Solution, Piriteze Allergy Syrup, Pollenshield, Zirtek) and loratadine (e.g. Clarityn). Drowsiness is not usually a problem with these products, plus they tend to have a longer duration of action, so don't need to be taken so frequently.

● **Anti-inflammatory medicines** – in hayfever, one of the main symptoms is inflammation of the lining of the nose. There are two main groups of medicines that treat this symptom:

1. Corticosteroid nasal sprays – examples include beclometasone dipropionate (e.g. Beconase), fluticasone propionate (e.g. Pirinase Hayfever Nasal Spray) and triamcinolone acetonide (e.g. Nasacort). These are often the first choice of treatment for people who experience regular allergy symptoms over a long period of time. They are effective against all allergy symptoms, from itchy, watery eyes to sneezing and nasal blockage. For best results, the sufferer should start to use this medication a couple of weeks before the allergy season starts. They should then be used daily, regardless of whether the person has hayfever symptoms on that particular day or not.

2. Sodium cromoglicate – works by stabilising cells in the body called mast cells, which

normally produce histamine. The more stable these cells are, the less likely they are to release histamine. These products work to help prevent hayfever symptoms and need to be taken regularly. Sodium cromoglicate is available in eye drops. Examples include Opticrom Allergy and Optrex Allergy Eye Drops.

Other products for hayfever include:

- Care Allergy Defence – a nasal spray based on inert natural cellulose powder. It works by forming a mesh-like barrier that blocks pollen from triggering hayfever symptoms
- Prevalin – a drug-free nasal spray that works by defusing allergens already inside the nose, forming a micro gel barrier to block further allergens irritating the nose, and helping to clear allergens in the nose
- Haymax – a balm that provides a barrier against pollen. A small amount is applied to the base of the nostrils and should be reapplied after sneezing or blowing the nose
- Stérimar Nasal Hygiene – a natural sea water nasal spray that helps to clear pollen and other airborne allergens out of the nose
- Herbal and homoeopathic options are also available: Potter's Allerclear Hayfever Tablets; Seven Seas New Era Hayfever and Allergic Rhinitis; and Nelsons Pollena.

Each product's instructions should be read carefully to help determine patient suitability.

More information

- Allergy UK: www.allergyuk.org
- Helpline: 01322 619898

assessment questions: hayfever

For each question, select one correct answer. Discuss your answers with your pharmacist.

1) Which of the following statements is FALSE?

- a) Hayfever is more common in girls than it is in boys
- b) Those with a family history of allergic conditions are more likely to suffer from hayfever
- c) Climate change, urbanisation, air pollution and cleaner lifestyles have all been suggested as the cause of increasing hayfever prevalence
- d) The number of older people suffering from hayfever for the first time is rising

2) Which of the following statements is TRUE?

- a) The correct medical term for hayfever is 'seasonal allergic rhinitis'
- b) Pollen is not the allergen that triggers hayfever
- c) Pollen counts are constant throughout the year
- d) Exposure to aerosols, pollution and smoke can improve symptoms in some sufferers

3) Which of the following is NOT recognised as a common symptom of hayfever?

- a) Sneezing
- b) Runny nose or nasal congestion
- c) Itchy eyes, ears, nose or mouth
- d) Migraines

4) Which of the following allergy sufferers does NOT need to be referred to the pharmacist?

- a) A six-year-old boy who has never suffered from hayfever before and is producing a yellow nasal discharge
- b) An asthmatic pregnant woman
- c) A middle-aged woman who suffers from nasal congestion during the summer months
- d) A teenager who is suffering unacceptable side-effects from his OTC treatment

5) Which of the following statements is FALSE?

- a) Different types of pollen vary in their size and structure, and may not all produce symptoms in every hayfever sufferer
- b) Grass pollen affects around 90 per cent of hayfever sufferers
- c) Humid, windy days help to stop the spread of pollen
- d) Symptoms appearing on cool, damp autumn days may be triggered by mould and fungal spores

6) Which of the following statements is TRUE?

- a) Corticosteroid sprays are suited to customers who experience occasional symptoms
- b) Older oral antihistamines can cause drowsiness as one of their side-effects
- c) Keeping windows and doors open on high pollen count days helps to ventilate the air and reduce pollen levels indoors
- d) Sodium cromoglicate works by making mast cells less stable