

Seasonal allergies in children

What are seasonal allergies? — Seasonal allergies, also called “hay fever,” are a group of conditions that can cause sneezing, a stuffy nose, or a runny nose. Symptoms occur only at certain times of the year. Most seasonal allergies are caused by:

- Pollens from trees, grasses, or weeds
- Mold spores, which grow when the weather is humid, wet, or damp

Normally, people breathe in these substances without a problem. When a person has a seasonal allergy, his or her immune system acts as if the substance is harmful to the body. This causes symptoms.

Many people first get seasonal allergies when they are children. Seasonal allergies are life long, but symptoms can get better or worse over time. Seasonal allergies sometimes run in families.

Some people have symptoms like those of seasonal allergies, but their symptoms last all year. Year-round symptoms are usually caused by:

- Insects, such as dust mites and cockroaches
- Animals, such as cats and dogs
- Mold spores

Many children with seasonal allergies also have asthma. (Asthma is a condition that can make it hard to breathe.)

What are the symptoms of seasonal allergies? — Symptoms of seasonal allergies can include:

- Stuffy nose, runny nose, or sneezing a lot
- Itchy or red eyes
- Sore throat, or itchy throat or ears
- Waking up at night or trouble sleeping, which can lead to feeling tired or having trouble concentrating during the day

Young children often do not blow their nose but instead sniff, cough, or clear their throat a lot. They might also get into the habit of breathing through their mouth because their nose is stuffy.

Because children do not always understand what allergies are or how they affect people, they sometimes put up with severe symptoms. This can really affect their life. Children with allergies can have trouble concentrating or doing school work. They can even have trouble with sports. Your child might not be able to tell you what is wrong, but you can look for symptoms that show up at the same time each year or last a long time. You might also be able to tell that a child has allergies by the way he or she looks.

Seasonal allergy symptoms usually don't show up in children until after age 2. If your child is younger than 2 and has these symptoms, talk to his or her doctor about what might be causing them.

Is there a test for seasonal allergies? — Yes. Your child's doctor will ask about his or her symptoms and do an exam. He or she might order other tests, such as allergy skin testing. Skin testing can help the doctor figure out what your child is allergic to. During a skin test, a doctor will put a drop of the substance your child might be allergic to on his or her skin, and make a tiny prick in the skin. Then, he or she will watch your child's skin to see if it turns red and bumpy.

How are seasonal allergies treated? — Children with seasonal allergies might get one or more of the following treatments to help reduce their symptoms:

- **Nose rinses** – Older children can try nose rinses. Rinsing out the nose with salt water cleans the inside of the nose and gets rid of pollen in the nose. This can also help to clear things out if the nose is very stuffed up. Different devices can be used to rinse the nose.

- **Steroid nose sprays** – Doctors often prescribe these sprays first, but it can take days to weeks before they work. (Steroid nose sprays do not contain the same steroids that athletes take to build muscle.) Your child’s doctor will prescribe the safest dose for his or her age. In the US, it’s also possible to get one steroid nose spray without a prescription. If you decide to use this on your child, check with your child’s doctor if your child needs it more than 2 months of the year. Use for longer than 2 months should be monitored by a doctor or nurse.

- **Antihistamines** – These medicines help stop itching, sneezing, and runny nose symptoms. Some antihistamines can make people feel tired, and should not be given to young children. Talk to your child’s doctor before trying any new medicines.

- **Allergy shots** – Your child’s doctor might suggest that he or she get allergy shots. Usually, allergy shots are given every week or month by an allergy doctor. These shots can help lower your child’s risk of getting asthma later in life.

If you want to try over-the-counter (nonprescription) medicines for your child, be sure to read the directions carefully. Some, like medicines used to treat a stuffy nose or red eyes, are not safe for young children.

Talk with your child’s doctor or nurse about the benefits and downsides of the different treatments. The right treatment for your child will depend a lot on his or her symptoms and other health problems. It is also important to talk with your child’s doctor or nurse about when and how your child should take certain medicines.

Can seasonal allergy symptoms be prevented? — Yes. If your child gets symptoms at the same time every year, talk with his or her doctor or nurse. Some people can prevent symptoms by starting their medicine a week or two before that time of the year.

You can also help prevent symptoms by having your child avoid the things he or she is allergic to. For example, if your child is allergic to pollen, you can:

- Keep your child inside during the times of the year when he or she has symptoms
- Keep car and house windows closed, and use air conditioning instead
- Have your child take a bath or shower before bed to rinse pollen off the hair and skin
- Use a vacuum with a special filter (called a “HEPA filter”) to keep indoor air as clean as possible

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