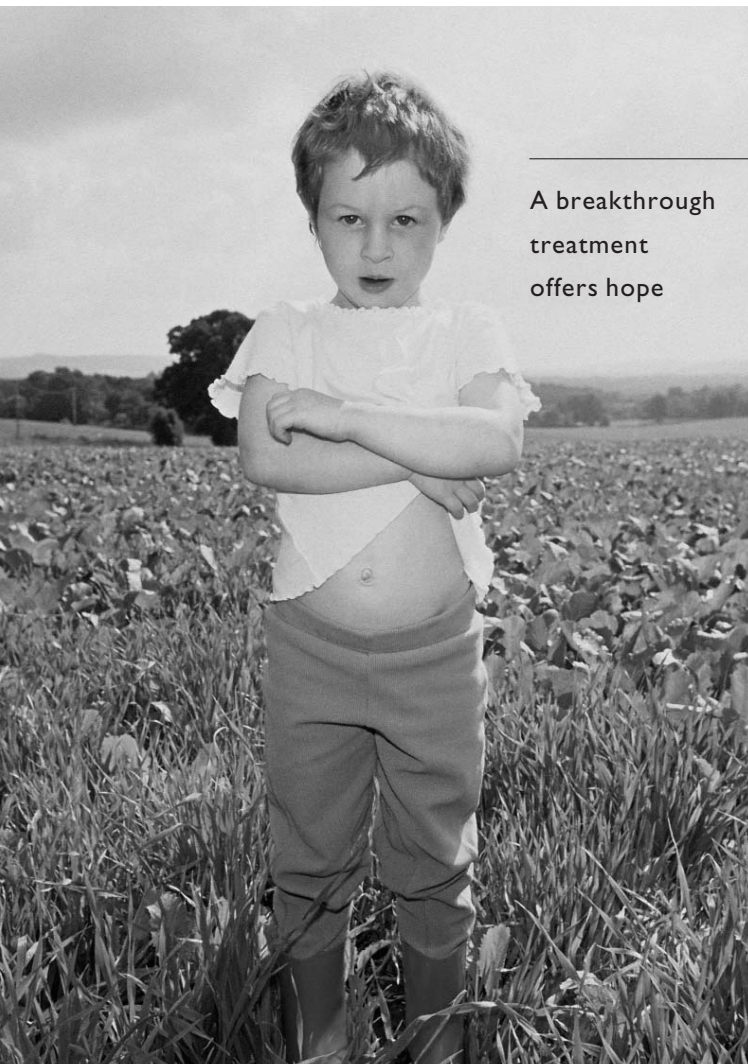




# Allergies driving you mad?



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A breakthrough  
treatment  
offers hope

More people succumb to hay fever every year. Approximately 40% of Australians now suffer, which means it's almost doubled in a generation.

If you're a sufferer, you'll know hay fever is more than a sniffle and a reddening of the eyes. Uncontrollable sneezing, irritating cough, itchy throat, blocked nose, nausea and fatigue are all symptoms. It can even confine some people to bed for a few days like a bad case of the flu.

The technical name for hay fever is allergic rhinitis and other things can trigger it including dust mites in your house, chemicals, perfumes and smoke. 'Hay fever' however, is usually associated with seasonal pollen-induced allergies, often caused by rye grass.

### **Why do we sneeze when there's pollen in the air?**

Pollen is part of the reproductive cycle of a plant. In fact, what the pollen is doing is trying to 'mate' with the inside of your nose! Naturally your body doesn't want to have anything to do with that, so it produces 'mast' cells to fight them off. Mast cells break down and produce 'histamine' which make the lining of the nose swell thus creating a thicker barrier for the invaders.

Generally rye grass is the worst offender, but all grasses have the potential to stimulate an allergic reaction. Travellers often report that their first hay fever reaction begins in a foreign country where they have been exposed to large amounts of a pollen that they're not accustomed to.

### **How to minimise your hay fever:**

- Avoid grassy areas or mowing the lawn.
- Don't go out on windy days.
- Wear wrap around sunglasses.
- Keep your windows shut.
- Saline nose sprays can help "rinse out the nose".
- Showering will remove pollens/dust from the skin.
- Rinse out your eyes with water if they are itchy.

### **Medication**

Over the counter non-sedating, anti-histamines will usually provide relief, or there are a number of effective nasal sprays which contain a small amount of cortisone for the more difficult cases.

### **Immunotherapy**

If you are struggling with your allergies, skin patch testing can help identify your particular triggers and if it's only one irritant, then immunotherapy – or desensitisation therapy can cure some people of symptoms.

The treatment involves the administration of gradually increasing amounts of allergic material (such as extracts of grasses and dust mite) – given to a patient by a series of injections over up to 2 years.

These allergy shots alter the way in which the immune system reacts to such allergens. The end result is that the hay fever sufferer (with allergic rhinitis) becomes "immune" to the allergens and can tolerate them with fewer or no symptoms. Some no longer need medication for itchy eyes and nose, sneezing, or a runny nose.

### **Any side effects?**

Side effects of immunotherapy via injections are generally minimal. Many patients develop a localised swelling at the site of the injection, which can be treated with oral antihistamines or ice packs. If the swelling is large, your doctor may need to reduce the dose.

More serious reactions are uncommon. Up to 10 per cent of people may have more than a local reaction but these simple measures will reduce the risk considerably:

- Remain in the doctor's surgery for at least 30 to 45 minutes after injection.
- Avoid exercising for several hours afterwards.
- Avoid some heart and blood pressure medications (eg beta blockers).
- Inform your doctor about any reactions you may have experienced after your last injection and any new medications you are taking (eg eye drops).

The Australasian Society of Clinical Immunology and Allergy said that patients needed to be committed for it to work and must cooperate with their doctor to minimise the frequency of side effects.

### **Web sites of interest**

Australasian Society of Clinical Immunology and Allergy

[www.allergy.org.au](http://www.allergy.org.au)

[www.allergycentre.com.au](http://www.allergycentre.com.au)





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