Managing hay fever during the exam period

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- The symptoms of hay fever
- Tips for managing and reducing symptoms
- Treatment options

Hay-fever symptoms tend to coincide with school and college examination periods and, if uncontrolled, can have a detrimental effect on students’ results.

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Watery eyes are a common symptom

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Abstract

Hay-fever symptoms are common and debilitating and can have a detrimental effect on students’ examination results. It is important to provide effective treatment using medication that optimises symptom control while ensuring drug side-effects are minimised. Research has confirmed that uncontrolled hay fever or medication side-effects can have a detrimental outcome on exam results. Ideally treatment should commence shortly before the start of the hay-fever season.

Seasonal allergic rhinitis (hay fever) symptoms range from mild to severe and can include a runny or blocked nose, itchy, red or watery eyes, frequent sneezing and an itchy feeling in the mouth, throat, nose or ears. There is a relationship between high pollen counts and symptoms appearing shortly after exposure to allergens. Hay fever is often regarded as trivial but not by those who have the condition; the symptoms can significantly affect a person’s quality of life, leading to headaches, difficulty sleeping and impaired concentration during the day (Walker et al, 2007; Malone et al, 1997).

The main pollen season runs from March to September, although this can vary depending on geographical area and biological and weather factors. The most common trigger for hay fever is an allergy to grass pollen, which is at its most prevalent from mid-May to July (Box 1). Hay fever has a peak onset during adolescence, critically affecting young people aged 15-17 years. This is the age at which most students sit their GCSE or A/AS Level examinations, and these are often programmed to occur during the peak grass-pollen season. Walker et al (2007) demonstrated that students who had hay-fever symptoms on the day they were sitting an examination were 40% more likely to drop a grade from their predicted (mock exam) results. This figure rises to 70% in those taking anti-histamines with a sedative effect. This real-life study highlights the importance of recognising not only the impact uncontrolled hay-fever symptoms can have on key examination results, but also that incorrect treatment of symptoms can affect exam results.

Exam season is a stressful time of year for all students, particularly those who are also experiencing hay-fever symptoms. Controlling these symptoms and minimising side-effects can help to reduce stress and can have a positive effect not only on students’ examination results but also, potentially, their future academic and career options.

Management
A diagnosis of hay fever can be confirmed by identifying whether the symptoms fit with a pattern of histamine release relating to the pollen season; symptoms usually occur within 15 minutes of exposure to allergens (Pearce, 2012). Objective testing such as blood immunoglobulin E (IgE) levels or skin-prick testing is not usually necessary in straightforward hay fever unless the relationship between exposure and symptoms is not clear (Pearce, 2012). Family history is important as allergy is

5 key points

1. Symptoms of hay fever are debilitating and can interfere with concentration

2. Studies have demonstrated that not receiving treatment, or receiving inappropriate treatment, can have a detrimental effect on exam results

3. Practical steps can be taken to manage hay fever symptoms but medication may be needed

4. Treatment should be planned and started promptly, ideally before the start of the hay-fever season

5. A short course of oral corticosteroids may be used to treat severe, uncontrolled symptoms