Asthma, Hay Fever and Pollen Allergy

Pollen from grasses, weeds or trees is a common trigger for hay fever (allergic rhinitis) and asthma in Australia. If you are allergic to pollen, minimising your exposure will help keep you well when pollen counts are at their highest.

The ACT has the highest rate of hay fever in Australia, affecting 1 in 4 residents. Hay fever is an allergic reaction to allergens, like pollen, breathed in through the nose. This causes an immune response in the lining of the nose where the nasal passages become red, swollen and sensitive. Some people may experience hay fever at certain times of the year, for example spring or summer, and other people experience these symptoms all year round.

Asthma is a long-term lung condition, affecting 1 in 9 residents in the ACT. People with asthma have sensitive airways in their lungs that react to triggers, including pollen. This causes symptoms such as chest tightness, cough, shortness of breath and wheezing, and sometimes leads to a ‘flare-up’ or attack. An asthma flare-up can come on slowly (over hours, days or even weeks) or very quickly (over minutes). Asthma is a complex condition that can lead to medical emergency.

When is pollen season in the ACT?

In the ACT, pollen is highest in spring, however the season can last for several months, starting as early as July and extending through to February. There are several factors that may affect higher pollen levels during pollen season.

These include:
- dry conditions during the winter season, with below average rainfall and above average minimum temperatures
- a drier than average seasonal conditions forecast, with below average rainfall, and warmer than average temperatures

Symptoms of pollen allergy

Pollen allergy can cause:
- runny, itchy, blocked nose
- sneezing
- irritable, itchy, watery and red eyes
- itchy ears, throat and roof of the mouth

Hay fever caused by pollen allergy can lead to sinus infections and poor sleep. It also makes asthma harder to control. Fortunately, there is plenty people can do to manage their asthma and hay fever.
Thunderstorm asthma

Pollen also brings the chance of thunderstorm asthma. Thunderstorm asthma is a rare event triggered by an uncommon combination of high grass pollen and a specific kind of thunderstorm, causing pollen grains from grasses to be swept up in the wind and carried long distances. People with asthma and hay fever are at risk of asthma symptoms, sometimes severe, during a thunderstorm asthma.

For people with asthma or hay fever, especially those who experience wheezing or coughing with their hay fever, thunderstorm asthma can be sudden, serious and even life threatening. Not all people with asthma are affected by thunderstorm asthma, and many people who suffer from thunderstorm asthma do not have a history of asthma.

Thunderstorm asthma events are uncommon and don’t occur every year. However, when they do, they generally occur during the grass pollen season which runs from October through to December in south-east Australia.

If pollen is a problem for you, then thunderstorms in spring and summer may also affect you. To reduce the risk of thunderstorm asthma, it is recommended to aim for optimum asthma management year-round. This means optimising preventer use during spring thunderstorm season, controlling hay fever, checking pollen levels and avoiding exposure to pollen on these days where possible.

How to prepare for pollen season in the ACT

Remember, you may not have been previously diagnosed with asthma, but can experience regular symptoms during spring, including wheezing and sneezing. If this happens, consult your doctor. You may benefit from preventer medication and having an action plan for emergencies.

As grass pollen season approaches, here are some things you can do to prepare:

- **See your doctor at the beginning of spring** to make sure your management plan is in place.
- **If you have asthma**, always carry your blue reliever puffer with you and follow a written asthma action plan so that you can respond to a flare up of symptoms from a range of potential causes.
- **If you have hay fever**, see your pharmacist or doctor for a hay fever treatment plan.
- **If you have hay fever, and especially if you experience wheezing and coughing with your hay fever**, it is important to make sure you don’t also have asthma. Speak to your doctor for further advice.
- **Access the free ACT Children’s Asthma Education Service**. This service provides children, young people and their families with initial and continuing support to manage their asthma.
- **Download the AirRater app**. This free app provides users with up-to-date information on total pollen (including tree and grass pollens), smoke pollution and
temperature in the ACT. AirRater also allows you to track symptoms such as sneezing, itchy eyes or shortness of breath. These symptoms are often the result of exposure to something in the air, like pollen or smoke. Over time, AirRater will build up a picture of when and where you get these symptoms.

- **Visit the Canberra Pollen Count and Forecast Service.** This page provides a daily grass pollen forecast and a free app available from iTunes or Google Play. Grass pollens have been associated with thunderstorm asthma epidemics. This service is maintained by the Australian National University with input and support by the ACT Health Directorate.

*Please note that pollen levels may vary between AirRater and the Canberra Pollen Count and Forecast Service from time to time. These differences arise because AirRater measures total pollens and Canberra Pollen Count and Forecast Service measures grass pollen only.*

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