

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 almost 1 in 3 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?

The ACT pollen season generally runs between September and December each year, with tree pollen prominent from September to October and grass pollen from October to December.

There are several factors that may affect higher pollen levels during the 2020 pollen season. These include:

- Wetter than average conditions experienced in the ACT during the winter season, with above average rainfall and above average minimum temperatures.
- The outlook for September to November indicates a wetter than average three-month period for the eastern two thirds of Australia.

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.

Pollen allergy and COVID-19

The symptoms of hay fever and asthma can be similar to COVID-19 and it can be difficult to tell the difference between them. It is important that you do not assume these symptoms are hay fever or asthma. If you have symptoms that are in any way different to your usual hay fever or asthma symptoms or have restarted after a period of absence – get tested for COVID-19 and stay home until you get your results. If you are unsure, you should get tested for COVID-19.

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 event.

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 some 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, downloading the AirRater app and avoiding exposure to pollen on these days where possible.

How to prepare for pollen season

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.

Here are some things you can do to prepare:

- **If you are affected by pollen**, see your doctor at the beginning of spring to make sure your action 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 AirRater also allows you to track symptoms such as sneezing, itchy eyes or shortness of breath. 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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