



This time of year hay fever sufferers are at their wits' end. But **Rachel Borrill** hears there are alternatives to 'old generation' antihistamine drugs which offer relief

A new way to cope with the big sneeze

People feel so drained they can't lift their heads off the pillow, they have blinding headaches. There is pressure over their sinuses and congestion

HAY FEVER is the invisible, seasonable enemy that reduces sufferers to a red-eyed, sneezing, wheezing wreck, affecting at least one-in-four Irish. But it doesn't have to be that way, according to many allergy experts.

Dr Paul Carson, who works for the Slieve-more Clinic, Dublin and has written five health books on allergies, says there are many new and effective hay fever treatments available, including trying to cure it, but they are mostly on prescription.

"The problem is a lot of people self-medicate, particularly during this recession, because they can't afford to go to the doctor," he explains. "So when they feel completely debilitated, they then seek medical help and will need to have a structured programme set out."

Hayfever, or seasonal allergic rhinitis as it known medically, is a reaction to pollen, with 90% of hayfever sufferers allergic to grass. Dr Carson describes the symptoms as "very debilitating" and can greatly effect sufferers' quality of life.

"It doesn't kill us," he says. "But people will feel dreadfully fatigued, exhausted, constantly sneezing, sniffing, and itching their eyes. Their chests can feel wheezy and in small children it can trigger old eczema to flare up again."

"People feel so drained they can't lift their heads off the pillow, they have blinding headaches. There is pressure over their sinuses and congestion."

According to several allergy experts, the 'old generation' of antihistamine treatments, which are available over the pharmacy counter, tend to cause drowsiness. With many, hay fever sufferers complained of falling asleep at inappropriate times, being unable to work or study.

However the 'new generation' of antihistamine drugs, that are only available on pre-

scription are long lasting and non-drowsy.

"You don't have to put up with hay fever," says Dr Caroline Dore Geraghty, an allergy expert at the Winter Park Clinic, Foxrock, Dublin. "People were taking the wrong antihistamine. There are treatments that will control your symptoms and it is important to get them."

For severe hay fever sufferers, who want to try to "cure" their problem and are committed to sticking to a rigid three-to-five-year plan, there is help at hand.

Immunotherapy, basically gives the patient exactly what they are allergic to. In this case, Grazax, which is a pure grass pollen in a tablet. It dissolves under the tongue and has to be taken daily.

"It does work and I have a lot of patents on it. You can't start during the pollen season and it is often a case of people coming in saying that have had a dreadful summer," says Dr Carson.

"You are trying to sort it out for them, making them better and saying so 'What do you want, to do long term? Do you want to come in every spring time to work out a plan for the summer or do you want to get your head around trying to cure the problem long term, by committing yourself, even in the coldest month in winter to taking a grass pollen tablet?'"

In Ireland the high pollen season begins sometime in June, depending upon where you live in the country. The warmer weather in south west Cork can mean that the season starts mid-May, with the worst days for Irish sufferers being hot, sunny days with light winds and no rain.

As the heat and sunshine encourages plants to open their sacs, the wind disperses the pollen and the lack of rain means pollen remains in the atmosphere longer.

Perhaps surprisingly, Dr Carson says that people who live in cities and towns suffer the worst hay fever than those living in the country.

“The reason is that the grass pollen leeches with something in the diesel fumes and it produces a super pollen, so these people tend to get more aggressive hay fever than those living in the countryside, where you get a more pure pollen,” he explains.

A new survey, carried out by **Empathy Research**, reveals the extent of how far hay fever affects every aspect of the sufferer's lives. A third said they miss out on outdoor exercise because of their symptoms.

Half of all participants aged 25-34 felt unattractive, with one-in-10 saying it had affected their sex life, and one-in-five stating they avoid going out altogether when the pollen count is high.

Dr Carson and Dr Dore Geraghty suggest hay fever sufferers take pre-emptive action by visiting their GP and working out a treatment plan before the high pollen season, this is particularly important for students who take summer exams.

Dr Dore Geraghty points out that a study in Britain found that teenagers who suffered from hay fever while taking their GCSE or A levels, and did not medicate or were taking over-the-counter treatments, dropped a grade. “This could have an impact on their lives,” she says. “I would say to every parent: if your child suffers from hay fever, and suffers badly then at this stage you should see your GP and get into a routine trial of treatments to see what works.”

Although children do suffer with hay fever, it is often thought that their symptoms are simply a summer cold, but by the time they are teenagers, the symptoms tend to be

worse, and they are diagnosed with hay fever allergies.

However Dr Dore Geraghty suggests there are a number of simple steps you can take to ease your child/teenager's hay fever symptoms, before turning to medication.

They should wear wraparound sunglasses to stop the pollen being blown into their eyes and if they are playing out a lot during the day, then a regular night time shower is a good idea to wash the pollen out of their hair, to help them to sleep, so it will not irritate them at night.

Also listen out for the daily pollen counts, usually mentioned by Met Eireann in the weather bulletins. “If they are going outside to the park, give them an antihistamine or parents who are steroid phobic, can give Prevalin, which is a natural barrier to stop the pollen going into the nose,” she says.

Unfortunately in some cases, if the hay fever symptoms aren't treated properly, then in later life, it can lead on to asthma.

“I have just seen a patient who has massive pollen allergies and inside an area of his nose was a disaster zone because it had not been treated properly over the years. He is now potentially asthmatic,” explains Dr Carson.

According to the medical evidence, hay fever and allergies in general, seem to be on the increase in the developed world. This is due a number of reasons, including pollution and the chemicals in our diets.

“Basically, the more westernised our lifestyles, the more the allergies seem to surface,” explains Dr Carson.





The pollen count dictated my day

FOR as long as Ciara Tunstead, 19, can remember she has suffered from hayfever. But during the last three years, as she studied for her Leaving Certificate, it has got worse and made her life very difficult.

"I found it very hard to deal with during my exams," she explains. "The examiner opened up the windows and left the hall doors open but it just made things worst for me. I was trying to get my tissues out, without disturbing anyone else."

Her symptoms were irritated, teary and itchy red eyes and a blocked nose, and although Ciara had tried lots of different anti-histamine treatments, they all made her feel very drowsy.

"I was bunged up from April to September, and nothing on the market worked," she says. "I definitely think it affected my exam results. I had set myself a goal of 400

points, and I got 375."

Ciara, from Finglas, Dublin also believes her hayfever affected her social life and self-esteem. She would have to make plans to meet friends later in the day when the pollen count would be lower, otherwise she would be sneezing all the time.

"It simply wasn't worth it," she says. "My nose would be running, my mascara would be half-way down my face and it was horrible."

Now studying marketing at Dublin Institute of Technology, Ciara has again tried to find something to alleviate her symptoms and so far is happy with Prevlina, a new natural nasal spray.

"I have been taking it once in the morning, it clears my nose and so far lasts all day," she says.

ENVIRONMENTAL HAZARD: Ciara Tunstead says that her social life and self esteem has been affected as a hay fever sufferer. Picture: Nick Bradshaw