



## Ragweed Allergy

The pollen from ragweed causes allergy symptoms in many people. These symptoms include sneezing, runny or stuffy nose, and itchy throat. This is often called hay fever or by its medical term, seasonal allergic rhinitis. Read this fact sheet to find out how to limit your contact with ragweed pollen and treat hay fever.

*When my daughter, Sasha, began 5th grade, she had what I thought was a cold that just wouldn't go away. Her symptoms got worse after she'd been outside for a long time. Sasha's doctor\* tested her for allergies and found out she was allergic to ragweed. During September, there had been a lot of ragweed pollen in the air. I now keep the windows closed in early fall and use air-conditioning when it's warm. Sasha tries to stay inside during the middle of the day when pollen counts are high and takes the medicine her doctor ordered. Her school allowed her to stay inside after she gave them a doctor's note about her allergy. She's now feeling great.*  
*Stephanie, Sasha's mother*

### What is ragweed?

It's a weed that can grow almost anywhere but especially in the east and midwest of the United States. From August to November, ragweed blooms and releases pollen—a very fine powder also made by trees, grasses, and flowers. In many areas of the country, ragweed pollen levels are highest in mid-September.

### What do pollen counts mean?

Pollen is measured for specific plants such as ragweed, grasses, oak trees, and cottonwood trees and reported as pollen counts. These counts give the number of grains of pollen in a certain amount of air in a set time period (usually 24 hours). But the counts change with the time of day and weather (rain, humidity, sun, and wind). For example, they are likely higher on warm, breezy days and lower on chilly, wet days. Ragweed pollen is usually highest between 10 a.m. and 3 p.m., depending upon the weather.

Some places give a total pollen count rather than pollen counts for specific plants. A high total pollen count doesn't always mean you'll have allergy symptoms, because the pollen from the plant you're allergic to may not be high.



### To find ragweed pollen counts

- Check the weather section of your local newspaper.
- Call the weather information telephone number for your area.
- Check the National Allergy Bureau's Web site: [www.aaaai.org/nab/index.cfm](http://www.aaaai.org/nab/index.cfm)



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## What is ragweed allergy?

When ragweed pollen in the air enters the nose and throat of people who are allergic to that pollen, it can cause allergy and asthma symptoms.

An allergy occurs when you react to things like pollen and cats that don't affect most people. If you come into contact with something you are allergic to (called an allergen), you may have symptoms. This is called an allergic reaction. See AAFA's fact sheet, Basic Facts about Allergies.

## Who gets ragweed allergy?

People whose parents or brothers or sisters have allergies to plant pollen are more likely to develop ragweed allergies. Also, people who have allergies to dust, animals, or mold tend to develop allergies to pollens, and people who already have an allergy to one type of plant pollen tend to develop allergies to other pollens.

## What are the symptoms of ragweed allergy?

The symptoms of ragweed allergy include sneezing; runny or stuffy nose; itchy throat or inside of ears; hives; and swollen eyelids and itchy eyes. This is often called hay fever or seasonal allergic rhinitis. Some people also develop asthma symptoms, such as coughing, wheezing, and trouble breathing.

People who are allergic to ragweed often feel a tingling or burning in their mouths after they eat cantaloupe, honeydew melon, watermelon, or bananas. These fruits can cause these symptoms at any time but especially during ragweed season. Also, sunflower seeds, chamomile tea, and honey can cause severe symptoms in some people who have ragweed allergy.

## How is ragweed allergy diagnosed?

Your doctor will review your medical history, ask questions about your symptoms and allergens, and may test your blood. He or she may refer you to an allergist to do skin testing. With skin testing, a small amount of a possible allergen is pricked or scratched into the skin. If you're sensitive to an allergen, a small red lump appears on the skin.

### Examples of Other Weeds that Can Cause Hay Fever Symptoms

- *Burning bush (Kochia)*
- *Cocklebur*
- *Lamb's quarters*
- *Pigweed*
- *Sagebrush/Mugwort*
- *Tumbleweed (Russian thistle)*

## How is ragweed allergy treated?

- Avoid or limit contact with ragweed pollen. (See the next question.)
- Take medicine to relieve your symptoms. Some allergy medicines should be taken 1 to 2 weeks before ragweed season. Ask your doctor which medicine you should take ahead of time. See "What medicines are used to treat hay fever symptoms?" below.
- Get allergy shots, if they are recommended. Some people need them when they can't avoid an allergen. The shots contain a tiny but increasing amount of the allergen you're sensitive to. Over time, your body becomes used to the allergen and no longer reacts to it.





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## How can I avoid or limit contact with ragweed pollen?

- Wash your hands often. Pollen can stick to your hands when you touch something outside or a pet, if it has been outside.
- Limit your time outdoors when ragweed counts are high. See AAFA's fact sheet, Pollen and Mold Counts.
- Wear a dust mask that people like carpenters use (found in hardware stores) when you need to do outdoor tasks such as cutting the grass or raking leaves. Don't wear your outdoor work clothes in the house; they may have pollen on them.
- Clean and replace furnace and air conditioner filters often. Using HEPA (high efficiency particulate air) filters is recommended, which remove at least 99 percent of pollen, as well as animal dander, dust and other particles. See AAFA's fact sheet, Air Filters, for information on filters.
- Use a clothes dryer rather than outdoor clothes lines.
- If you take a vacation, choose places and times of the year to avoid high ragweed pollen counts.

### Keep in Mind...

*If you plan to move and have an allergy to ragweed pollen where you live now, you may get allergies to different plants after a few years in a new area. It's a good idea to talk to your doctor before you move. You also may want to try living in the new area for a few months before you move there.*

## What medicines are used to treat hay fever symptoms?

This chart gives a brief overview of medicines used to treat these symptoms. Talk to your doctor to find out which medicines are best for you.

TYPE OF MEDICINE	PURPOSE	HOW MEDICINE IS TAKEN	SOME BRAND NAMES <sup>1</sup>
Decongestant	Clears a stuffy nose	Pill, nasal (nose) drops, nasal spray	Afrin®, Sudafed™
Antihistamine	Relieves hay fever symptoms	Pill, liquid, nasal spray	Allegra®, Benadryl®, Claritin®, Zyrtec®
Nasal corticosteroid spray	Relieves hay fever symptoms	Nasal spray	Flonase®, Nasonex®, Rhinocort®
Cromolyn	Helps prevent hay fever symptoms	Nasal spray	Nasal crom®
Montelukast	Relieves hay fever symptoms	Pill	Singulair®

<sup>1</sup> This column provides a few examples of brand names. AAFA does not recommend any specific brands over others. Your doctor is the best person to help you decide which medicines you should try.





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## Who can treat my ragweed allergy?

- Your doctor can treat your ragweed allergy. If your allergy symptoms are not under control in 3 to 6 months or they are severe, you may need to see an allergy expert. Allergists are experts who treat allergies and asthma. Your doctor can refer you to an allergy or asthma expert.



## Do health insurance plans cover treatment for ragweed allergy?

Most health insurance plans cover this type of treatment.

Ask your insurance carrier:

- Does my insurance cover treatment for ragweed allergy?
- Does my insurance cover patient education or special services for ragweed allergy?
- Does my insurance cover a pre-existing problem? This usually means any health problem that you had before you joined your current health plan.
- Do I need a referral from my doctor to see an allergy expert?
- What allergy testing and medicines does my plan cover?

## For More Information

The Asthma and Allergy Foundation of America offers many fact sheets on asthma and allergies. You can order them by e-mail or toll-free telephone call or print copies from AAFA's website.

**Asthma and Allergy Foundation of America**  
Washington, D.C.  
Information Helpline: 1-800-7-ASTHMA (1-800-727-8462)  
E-mail: [info@aafa.org](mailto:info@aafa.org)  
[www.aafa.org](http://www.aafa.org)

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