FITNESS & EXERCISE

# How to Exercise When Hay Fever Follows You

You may not need to abandon outdoor exercise, but pollen, breathing symptoms and asthma deserve different levels of attention.

## The workout starts before you leave

Your shoes are by the door, your workout clothes are on, and your nose has other plans. You are sneezing. Your eyes itch. The air outside may contain the very thing that sets it all off. Exercising with hay fever can feel like a choice between missing the movement you wanted and spending the rest of the day congested and uncomfortable.

The useful question is not whether exercise is "good" or "bad" during hay fever season. The sources here do not answer that. The better question is how much pollen you are likely to meet, how your body usually responds, and whether your symptoms stay in your nose and eyes or move into your breathing.

Hay fever, also called allergic rhinitis, happens when pollen triggers an allergic response. According to the CDC, breathing in pollen can cause sneezing, congestion and a runny nose. Pollen exposure can also bring on allergic conjunctivitis, with red, watery or itchy eyes. The National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health also lists coughing and an itchy throat among seasonal allergy symptoms.

That matters because exercising outdoors is not a single, fixed exposure. Pollen levels change, and the CDC advises checking pollen forecasts and limiting outdoor time when levels are high. This does not supply a perfect personal threshold. It gives you something more practical: a reason to look at the conditions before automatically pushing through them.

## Make pollen the variable

You do not have to treat every bright day as a test of willpower. If the pollen forecast is high and outdoor time reliably leaves you miserable, changing where you exercise is a form of exposure control. Avoiding the substance that triggers a reaction is one of the established ways people manage allergies.

A mask may help when pollen counts are high, the National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health notes. Its advice also includes staying indoors or rinsing off after you return. The CDC recommends keeping windows closed during pollen season and using high-efficiency

filters in a home heating, ventilation and air-conditioning system, provided the system can safely use them without violating its warranty.

What happens after your workout counts too. The CDC advises showering after being outside to remove pollen from your skin and hair, changing your clothes, and washing your hands before touching your eyes indoors. It also advises against touching your eyes outside. Those steps will not erase the exposure you have already had, but they can keep pollen from remaining on you and your clothing.

None of this requires turning your home into a sealed chamber or treating one sneeze as failure. It means making pollen one adjustable part of the day. You can check the forecast, reduce outdoor exposure when levels are high, close the windows and clean up after being outside. That is a more grounded plan than hoping determination will overrule an allergic response.

## A runny nose is not a breathing plan

There is an important dividing line here. Sneezing, congestion and itchy eyes fit the usual picture of hay fever. Pollen can also cause an asthma attack when you have asthma and pollen is one of your triggers, the CDC warns. Once exercise is accompanied by airway symptoms, the issue is no longer simply whether you can tolerate an annoying nose.

Exercise itself can trigger temporary airway narrowing known as exercise-induced bronchoconstriction, or EIB. A 2021 systematic review described EIB as transient airway narrowing caused by exercise and noted that vigorous physical training may trigger airway symptoms and bronchoconstriction. Hay fever and EIB are not interchangeable, but allergic tendency, asthma and exercise-related airway narrowing can overlap.

The overlap is not rare in athletic populations. A 2021 systematic review and meta-analysis of 60 studies involving 7,501 post-pubertal adult athletes reported EIB in 23% of athletes. It also found atopy-an allergic tendency-more often among athletes with EIB. That does not mean hay fever predicts an episode during your workout. It means breathing trouble deserves more respect than a stubborn seasonal sniffle.

The evidence in children points in the same direction, while also showing how much prevalence varies. A 2019 meta-analysis found EIB in 9% of the general child and adolescent population, 15% of child and adolescent athletes, and 46% of children and adolescents with asthma. A later review of adolescent athletes with asthma found estimates ranging from 2.1% to 61% across studies.

If pollen or exercise is bringing on breathing symptoms-especially if you have asthma-this

stops being a lifestyle puzzle and becomes a medical question. Take your asthma or allergy medicine as prescribed, and talk with your health care provider about managing the pattern. A severe allergic reaction can be life-threatening, so severe symptoms are not something to exercise through.

## Testing is not as tidy as it sounds

You may expect one exercise test to settle whether EIB explains your symptoms. The research is less reassuring. A 2020 meta-analysis compared cardiopulmonary exercise testing with eucapnic voluntary hyperventilation, an indirect bronchoprovocation test. The two methods showed poor positive agreement, meaning they often did not identify the same people as having EIB.

When cardiopulmonary exercise testing was treated as the reference, positive agreement was 0.62 and negative agreement was 0.61. When the hyperventilation test was treated as the reference, positive agreement fell to 0.36 while negative agreement rose to 0.82. Positive results were also more common with hyperventilation testing than with exercise testing: 58.84% compared with 39.51%.

Those numbers are not instructions for choosing your own test. They show why a symptom that appears during exercise may need clinical interpretation rather than a quick label. The authors concluded that either test could identify people without EIB reasonably well, but the poor positive agreement makes a positive result less straightforward.

This uncertainty is one more reason not to assume every cough during pollen season is "just allergies," or that every difficult workout proves EIB. The supplied evidence supports a conversation with a health care provider when airway symptoms recur. It does not support diagnosing yourself from the setting, season or sensation alone.

## Skip the seductive shortcuts

Hay fever attracts remedies that promise to make the season disappear. The evidence is more modest. The National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health says saline nasal irrigation has some good evidence for modest symptom improvement. Rinsing devices must be used and cleaned correctly, and untreated tap water is not safe for nasal rinsing.

Honey has a sunnier reputation than its evidence deserves. Only a few studies have examined it for seasonal allergy symptoms, and there is no convincing scientific evidence that it provides relief. People allergic to pollen or bee stings may also be allergic to honey. Butterbur has hints

of possible benefit for nasal allergy symptoms, but there are safety concerns.

Evidence for acupuncture suggests it may help, based on an evaluation of 13 studies involving 2,365 participants. Probiotics may improve some symptoms and quality of life, but formulations vary between studies, making firm conclusions difficult. These approaches are not established substitutes for reducing pollen exposure or taking prescribed allergy and asthma medicines.

Antibiotics are not an answer either. The CDC states plainly that they do not work for seasonal allergies. Any antibiotic use can cause side effects and contribute to antibiotic resistance, so a bad pollen day is not a reason to seek one.

For the coming week, keep the plan simple. Check the pollen forecast before heading outside. On high-pollen days, reduce outdoor exposure or move your activity indoors. Keep windows closed, avoid rubbing your eyes, and shower and change clothes when you return. Most importantly, notice the boundary between nose-and-eye irritation and breathing trouble. That boundary is where your workout plan should give way to medical advice.

## Where this comes from

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