



Early Hay Fever

HAY FEVER originally got its name in England, because its severest outbreaks in that country came at the time of the hay harvest, and people got the idea that the hay was somehow responsible for their itchy noses and smarting, tearful eyes. In a way it was, but not exactly in the way people thought.

Hay is usually cut during or just after blossoming of the grass, because it is then at its highest point of development. It has reached its maximum growth, as well as its highest content of starches, sugars and proteins. Cut and cured at that stage it offers best nutrition for livestock.

However, by the same token, blossoming grass is of course shedding its pollen freely. All grasses are wind-pollinated, and wind-borne pollens of course are the great cause of hay fever. So because coincidence is mistaken for cause, hay gets the blame for what pollen does.

However, in this country at least, even grass pollens are responsible for only a very small fraction of hay fever cases. The big tide of sneezes, as everyone knows, begins in high summer, when the ragweeds come into bloom. Nine-tenths or more of all hay fever cases in the United States are traceable to ragweed pollen.

But even the early hay fever incidence is due only in minor degree to grass pollens. A much more important early hay-fever weed is the narrow-leaved plantain. Ranking close to this common lawn pest are various wind-pollinated tree flowers (and most tree pollen is wind-borne), notably oak, walnut, hickory and ash. Pine and other conifers produce immense quantities of pollen, but it seems to trouble fewer noses than

does the pollen of deciduous trees.

Early hay fever gives more trouble to allergists than late cases of the malady. If a patient comes in with typical symptoms during July or August, the odds are more than ten to one that ragweed pollen is to blame. But in May or June it may be any one of a score of plant species, so that the victim's arm has to be scored with many pollen-test scratches.

Ironically, people tend to blame bright flowers that they notice rather than the inconspicuous apetalous, usually green pollen-shedders that are really responsible. Just as goldenrod gets cursed for the crimes of the ragweeds, roses often "take the rap" for early hay fever, under the misnomer of "rose fever."

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