Winter is over, and signs of new plant life are everywhere. You step outside, take a deep breath—and are hit by a sneezing attack as your eyes begin to itch and swell. Suddenly you are unable to breathe through your nose. You may feel like turning around and sealing yourself up inside your home until pollen season is over.

You are not alone. Nearly 36 million people in the U.S. suffer from seasonal allergies, according to the American Academy of Allergy, Asthma and Immunology. Fortunately, there is more help than ever before for seasonal-allergy victims.

Allergic conjunctivitis is the most common seasonal allergy affecting the eyes. Its symptoms—itchy, watery, red and swollen eyes—are usually caused by exposure to pollen that accumulates in the air each year. Contact lens wearers may experience additional discomfort resulting from the collection of pollen and allergy-related eye secretions that bind to their lenses.

If you are one of the unlucky ones who suffer from those unpleasant eye symptoms, you probably are also a victim of seasonal allergic rhinitis—commonly known as hay fever—which defines your nose’s reaction to the same pollen: sneezing, congestion, postnasal drip, runny nose and itchy throat. In fact, pollen can travel through connecting ducts from the eyes into the nose.

Pollen is a fine powder that is released by plants and is carried through the air (sometimes for miles) to another plant of the same type in order to fertilize new seeds. The kind of pollen that causes allergic reactions comes from non-flowering plants, such as trees, grasses and weeds.
Eye drops and gels work more quickly and have fewer side effects than oral medicines. In fact, oral antihistamines, while successfully treating nasal allergy symptoms, can actually make eye symptoms worse by drying out your eyes and leaving them with less protection against pollen.

If over-the-counter medicine is ineffective, or if you are not sure that your symptoms are caused by an allergy, see your eye doctor. There are a number of very effective anti-allergy prescription eye drops today that are commonly prescribed by optometrists and ophthalmologists. If you wear contact lenses, ask your doctor about drops that can help relieve symptoms while keeping your lenses pollen-free. You may want to try daily disposable contact lenses to avoid the problem of pollen and other irritating deposits building up on your lenses. Another option is to visit an allergy specialist, who can give you a shot that will immunize you against the uncomfortable effects of pollen.

Many options exist that will allow you to enjoy the seasonal changes in relative comfort, despite your allergies. With proper care, today nearly everyone can survive allergy season without a lot of distress.

**The Best Treatment: Avoidance**

Doctors agree that the best way to control seasonal-allergy symptoms is to avoid the pollen that triggers them. That means staying indoors when pollen counts are highest. A good rule of thumb is to try to stay indoors as much as possible on hot, dry, windy days, and on any day between 5 a.m. and 10 a.m.

*When you are outdoors, follow these guidelines:*  
- Minimize walks in wooded areas or gardens.  
- Wear a mask when mowing the lawn or gardening. Better yet, ask a non-allergic person to do your yard work for you. Keep grass cut low—no more than 2 inches high—to help prevent pollen from reaching high into the wind.  
- Keep hedges in your yard pruned and thin to limit collection of pollen on their branches.  
- Dry your clothes and linens in an automatic dryer instead of hanging them outdoors.

*When you are indoors, maximize your protection by taking these steps:*  
- Keep windows closed, and use air conditioning both at home and in your car.  
- Cover home air conditioning vents with cheesecloth to filter out pollen. Clean air filters frequently—high-efficiency particulate air filters (HEPA) are the best—and clean air ducts at least once a year.  
- In your car, set the air conditioner to “recirculate” to keep new pollen-laden air from entering the vents.

**Medical Remedies**

If your symptoms are mild, some doctors recommend placing cold compresses directly on your closed eyes for 10 to 20 minutes. If that is not effective, visit your local pharmacy and buy an over-the-counter tear substitute, which can lubricate your eyes and help wash the pollen out.

It is important to treat eye allergies with eye medications. They may sometimes help relieve nasal symptoms as well as eye discomfort, by draining from the eye into the nose. It does not work the other way around, however; nasal sprays are generally prevented by gravity from reaching the eyes.