

New research links hayfever to poor academic performance

The impact of hayfever on school and in particular exam performance has long been a concern of allergy specialists the world over, and new research recently confirmed the serious implications for learners.



[Image: Stuart Miles / FreeDigitalPhotos.net](#)

The impact of hayfever on school and in particular exam performance has long been a concern of allergy specialists the world over, and new research recently confirmed the serious implications for learners.

Dr Michael Levin, a leading allergy advisor to pharmaceutical company, Pharma Dynamics, says the latest research provides ample evidence that untreated hayfever has a detrimental effect on concentration in school children and teenagers.

"According to a study commissioned by a charity organisation in the UK, Education for Health, teenagers suffering from hayfever were 40% more likely to drop a grade between their mock and final exams compared to their peers who were not affected by the seasonal ailment," says Dr Levin.

He says the figure rose to an astonishing 70% when youngsters were put on a sedating antihistamine treatment, which tends to cause drowsiness.

"More than 1800 learners aged 15 - 17 participated in the study, where exam performances in mock and final exams for Maths, English or Science were compared. The expectation was that most children would either achieve their predicted grades or, with increased effort, improve on them when writing their final exam. Any drop in grade was therefore unexpected.

"Another interesting point, is that a remarkable 28% of the learners who were taking medication for their symptoms were on

a sedating antihistamine, despite international guidelines advocating the use of widely-available non-sedating medication," says Dr Levin.

A second UK study, conducted by the National Pollen and Aerobiology Research Unit, further supported the correlation between high pollen counts and poor concentration levels among 7 - 10 year old children.

Thirty-five non-medicated children suffering from hayfever symptoms completed two standard concentration tests - one prior to the start of the grass pollen season, and one during the grass pollen season. The results showed that almost half of children (49%) had achieved a lower score in the second test, which was at the height of the hayfever season, because of decreased concentration levels.

Dr Levin notes that hayfever, also known as allergic rhinitis, has increased markedly in prevalence between the two big comparable studies done in 1995 and 2002. By 2002, the lifetime prevalence of symptoms of hayfever in 13 - 14 year old children was 49% with 41.5% having been diagnosed with the condition by a doctor. Symptoms of hayfever were reported to have a substantial impact on daily activities. With such large numbers of teenagers suffering from hayfever in SA, this has serious repercussions for the nation if not addressed.

"If a child is not feeling well and has an itchy nose or teary eyes for example, then they are less able to concentrate on normally straight-forward tasks. This in turn affects their schoolwork and could lead to a usually strong academic learner suddenly producing a lower standard of work."

Levin says secondary implications of the allergic condition manifest in school absenteeism, irritability, restlessness, mood disturbances and even social problems that could further worsen school performance.

"Children attending school while suffering from hayfever symptoms are often described as absent-minded and uninterested in educational or social activities. Sleep disturbances and therefore over-tiredness is common, leading to impaired concentration, poor school or work performance and even general depression.

"Exam time, in particular, is a period of considerable stress for many young people and their families. In addition to the rigour of the exams themselves, examination periods coincide with the peak of SA's hayfever season. This includes not only school exams, but also most university and college examinations.

"Crucial learning periods prior to exam taking are also adversely affected by uncontrolled symptoms.

"The findings of these studies will hopefully prompt parents of learners to ensure that their symptoms are under control, and that they are not on a sedating medication. Untreated hayfever symptoms can compound exam stress, while appropriate and timely treatment can transform a patient's life," says Dr Levin.

If any parents or learners seek more information, they can contact their pharmacist, GP or log on to www.allergyexpert.co.za to post queries to Dr Levin.