Antihistamines:
Which One Should I Take For My Seasonal Allergies?

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If you suffer from allergic rhinitis - also known as seasonal allergies or hay fever - you are probably familiar with some these symptoms: sneezing, nasal congestion, runny nose and watery eyes. If you've ever bought an antihistamine for your allergies, you are probably familiar with standing in the pharmacy, staring at an entire aisle of product options, and wondering: which one should I take?

Does it matter if I buy name brand or generic brand?

• For the most part, no. If you buy a generic (“no name”) brand of antihistamine, you are getting the same active ingredient that is in the name brand product.

• If you are sensitive to any inactive ingredients that are used as fillers, then one brand or another may be more desirable; otherwise, generic and name brand are both good options.

• Here is a list of brand names and their ingredients, to help you find the generic products on the shelf:
  • Reactine = cetirizine
  • Claritin = loratadine
  • Aerius = desloratadine
  • Allegra = fexofenadine

What products should I avoid?

• Avoid taking short-lasting antihistamines for seasonal allergies. Products such as Benadryl (diphenhydramine) and Chlor-Tripelon (chlorpheniramine) are useful for other types of allergic reactions, but they are sedating and their effects last only a few hours. Take a once-daily antihistamine instead. These will give a better, steadier result, especially after a few days of regular use.

• Avoid 2-in-1 products if you want something for everyday use. These are only intended to be taken for a short period of time. These contain a second ingredient called a decongestant, which may be unsafe for some people to take. Examples include: Claritin D, Allegra D, and Reactine Allergy and Sinus. Check with your doctor or pharmacist before taking these.
Which one is the best choice for me?

• Check with your pharmacist to figure this out. This is especially important if you take any other medications, or have a medical condition, or if your job requires you to be as alert as possible.

• Here is a list of the main differences between the once-daily antihistamines:

  - Cetirizine is the least likely to interact negatively with other medications. It is followed by desloratadine, fexofenadine, and then loratadine which has the longest list of potential interactions.
  
  - Cetirizine has a slightly higher chance of causing drowsiness than the others, even though it is classified as “non-drowsy”.
  
  - Desloratadine has a bit more proof than the others that it works for stuffy nose.
  
  - Cetirizine takes less than half an hour to have an effect while the others take an hour or longer.
  
  - Fexofenadine may not work as well if you take mineral antacids, or if you take it with apple, orange, pineapple or grapefruit juice.

Which is most effective once-daily antihistamine?

• The once-daily antihistamines are, on average, equal in how well they work. But not everybody responds the same to every antihistamine, so you may need to try one and then another.

When should I not take antihistamines?

• If you take any other medications or health products, or if you have any medical conditions, please check with your doctor and pharmacist first. Antihistamines may affect your condition, or cause unwanted side effects, or interact with your other medications.

Is there a wearing-off effect if I take the same antihistamine for a long time?

• Probably not. They used to think that the older, short-lasting antihistamines may have a reduced effect over time, but it was never clearly proven. From what we know of how antihistamines work in the body and how the body metabolizes them, it makes sense that there is not a wearing-off effect. So far, it has not been shown that switching from one antihistamine to another will give any benefit. If your antihistamine is not working as well as it used to, it’s a good idea to discuss this with your pharmacist or doctor. It may be that your condition or your level of exposure has changed.
Do I need to switch antihistamines?

• Maybe. There is no wearing-off effect over time, BUT there is the chance that you may respond better to one antihistamine or another. If you do not get benefit from one type, check with your pharmacist about what other type to try.

What’s the best way to take my antihistamine?

• Take your once-daily antihistamine once per day. Try to be consistent in what time of day you take it. Some result may be seen after just one dose, but the maximum effect is not seen until you have taken it steadily for several days. Here are some practical examples:

  • If you have an allergy season that is several weeks long, you will want to take the medication daily throughout that season.

  • If you are allergic to cats and you are going to visit someone with cats, you may want to start taking the antihistamine a few days ahead of that visit; or, at the very least, several hours beforehand.

  • If your allergic rhinitis is rare and unpredictable, you may consider taking a dose when symptoms occur; bear in mind that it may not be as effective as regular dosing, and it will take time to start working.

What if I have more questions?

• Talk to your local pharmacist. They will be happy to answer your questions and to assist you in making the best therapeutic choices to improve your health and well-being.

• Check out the Allergy/Asthma Information Association at www.aaia.ca

References

• www.e-therapeutics.ca -> Therapeutic Choices -> Allergic Rhinitis (accessed 2010 and July 2014)
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• Cook, V. Are you Allergy Aware? Apr. 1, 2014 Pharmacy Practice Plus.