

Antihistamines

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Antihistamines are most commonly used to help allergic rhinitis (also called “hay fever”). Rhinitis leads to swelling and inflammation that causes a runny or stuffy nose, sneezing, and itchy nose and eyes. Allergies are the most common cause of rhinitis. Many people who have asthma also have allergic rhinitis, which sometimes makes asthma worse or causes asthma attacks.

The symptoms of allergic rhinitis are caused by the chemical histamine. Histamine is released inside your sinuses when you come in contact with something you are allergic to (an allergen). Antihistamines block the effect of histamine in the sinuses. This helps the runny nose and congestion, the sneezing, and the itchy nose and eyes.

What are they?

There are many different antihistamines. Many can be purchased over-the-counter without a prescription others are only available with a prescription from your doctor. Some over-the-counter antihistamines can also relieve common cold symptoms and the itching caused by insect bites or stings, poison ivy, and other skin irritations.

Some over-the-counter antihistamines are:

- Clemastine (Tavist®)
- Chlorpheniramine (Chlor-Trimeton®)
- Diphenhydramine (Benadryl®)
- Cetirizine (Zytrec®)
- Loratadine (Claritin®)

Prescription antihistamines are used only to treat allergies.

Prescription antihistamines are:

- Fexofenadine (Allegra®)
- Desloratadine (Clarinex®)
- Levocetirizine (Xyzal®)

Antihistamines are sometimes combined with a nasal decongestant like pseudoephedrine (Sudafed®) to help open congested nasal passages.

Antihistamine plus nasal decongestant combinations are:

- Allegra-D®
- Claritin-D®
- Clarinex-D®
- Zyrtec-D®

Your doctor, pharmacist or nurse can help you select which product is best for you.

Antihistamines should be used:

- Regularly, to help prevent allergy symptoms and reduce the effect of allergies on your asthma.
- Once or twice a day.
- Only when needed, on days when allergy symptoms are present.
- Every day by people who have asthma, even if their allergy symptoms are not present.

Your doctor, pharmacist, or nurse can help you to decide what time of the day is best to take your medication.

Limiting your exposure to allergens

Antihistamines work well to treat and prevent allergy symptoms. If you are always around things you are allergic to, they will not work well. You must try to stay away from things you are allergic to. This will help the medicine work better and help your asthma.

Below is a list of actions you can take to limit your exposure to allergens.

Seasonal rhinitis or hay fever:

- Keep window closed, especially when sleeping.
- Stay inside on high pollen count days.
- Keep car windows closed when driving
- Shower and wash hair nightly to remove polens.
- Do not cut lawn or hedges.
- Plan vacations to avoid high pollen counts.
- Wear glasses or sunglasses to keep pollen out of your eyes.
- Choose houseplants carefully.

Perennial (year long) rhinitis:

- Avoid pets that you are allergic to.
- Clean your house thoroughly and frequently.
- Avoid down-filled pillows and bedding.
- Wash bedding weekly in hot water.
- Remove carpets where possible.
- Use slipcovers on furniture and wash often.

These are just a few things that may help your allergies. If you have any questions about how to avoid the things you are allergic to, please ask your doctor, pharmacist, or nurse.

Side effects

Most antihistamines cause very few side effects. There is also a difference in side effects between the over-the-counter antihistamines and prescriptions.

Over-the-counter antihistamines (except Claritin®):

- Drowsiness-- (drowsiness can be reduced by taking your first few doses of the over-the-counter antihistamine at bedtime until your body gets used to the effects of the medicine)
- Dry mouth

Prescription antihistamines:

- Side effects are very rare but drowsiness, headaches, constipation and skin rashes are possible.

Special instructions

Be sure your doctor or pharmacist knows all of the medicines you are taking including prescription medications, over-the-counter medications, and herbal medicines. In addition, talk to your doctor or pharmacist before taking any new medications.

Since the over-the-counter antihistamines can cause drowsiness, you should be sure of how the medicine affects you before driving your car or doing anything else that requires you to be alert. Do not drink alcohol while taking antihistamines because this may enhance the drowsy effects.

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