MEDICATION INFORMATION

Antihistamines

Antihistamines are used for treating a variety of allergic symptoms. These include allergic rhinitis (hay fever), nonallergic rhinitis, eczema, and hives, among others. Antihistamines are helpful because they block the effect of histamine, one of the chemical mediators of allergic reactions. Some of the newer antihistamines, when used on a regular schedule, also decrease the release of some of these chemical mediators, reducing the severity of allergic reactions when they do occur.

In the case of nasal symptoms, antihistamines relieve itching, sneezing, and nasal discharge, but most have little effect on nasal stuffiness. Because of this, combination medications, including decongestants, are sometimes employed. For persistent symptoms, such as chronic hives or severe seasonal hay fever symptoms, regular use of these medications tends to be more effective than when they are taken on an as-needed schedule. This is particularly true for the newer nonsedating antihistamines. Furthermore, since they do not affect work or school performance, there is no contraindication to continuing the newer-generation preparations as needed.

Until recently, sedation (drowsiness) has occurred to some degree with antihistamine medications. Several nonsedating or mildly sedating antihistamines have been developed (i.e., Allegra, Claritin, and Clarinex). Zyrtec is a relatively nonsedating antihistamine causing sedation in 10-15% of users. An updated version (Xyzal) is generally less sedating. Claritin (loratadine) and Zyrtec (cetirizine) have been changed from prescription to over-the-counter (OTC) status. Prices vary among the various OTC preparations, but the benefits are similar between brand name and generic. Many insurance companies no longer cover the newer prescription antihistamines because of the OTC availability of several. Although these medications are mostly used by mouth, some antihistamines are available as nasal sprays.

Side effects of earlier antihistamines have often included drowsiness and incoordination. Less commonly, restlessness, dry mouth, visual changes, and urinary retention occur. Taking these medications at bedtime may decrease daytime side effects such as drowsiness. Individuals with prostate hypertrophy should avoid antihistamine/decongestant preparations because of the possibility of urinary retention. Some of these problems are much less common with the newly introduced nonsedating antihistamines. However, even with the older preparations, many side effects decrease when they are used on a regular, day-to-day schedule. Antihistamines should be discontinued if there are any visual changes or difficulty in urination encountered.

Activities requiring attention, such as driving, bicycle riding, swimming, and use of dangerous equipment, among others, may be affected even when drowsiness or sedation is not obvious. Studies have shown that individuals using sedating antihistamines often do not recognize that their performance of these tasks may be impaired. Appropriate care must be taken.
For some patients, antihistamines seem to lose their effectiveness when taken consistently over long periods of time. Whether or not this decrease in effectiveness actually occurs is unclear. It has been suggested that rotating different antihistamines may avoid this problem. This problem does not seem to occur with the newer antihistamine preparations.

Antihistamines usually carry a warning to avoid use if you have asthma. This is outdated information. In fact, asthma is not a contraindication to taking antihistamines. Some actually benefit with concurrent use of antihistamines because of decreased nasal symptoms, posterior pharyngeal discharge, and possibly sinusitis as well. Furthermore, some antihistamines may actually benefit asthma directly.

These are general guidelines. Other side effects may occasionally occur. Always notify your doctor if you are experiencing adverse effects which seem to correlate with taking a medication or if you have not responded well to the treatment prescribed. Use of these medications should be discussed if you become pregnant, are breastfeeding, or develop any new medical condition after they have been prescribed. We are always available for discussion if you experience any difficulties or concerns.