



Seasonal Allergies

Allergy season is most definitely upon us (unless, that is, you're someone who suffers from them year-round). It's about this time of year that I often see a surge in people seeking help for their allergies – sometimes long-standing, and sometimes new. It is quite common that those who have just moved to the UK notice new allergies, even if they have never had any before. There are many different treatments available depending on the symptoms, and many you can buy over the counter at pharmacies without a prescription.

The symptoms of seasonal (or perennial) allergies can be wide ranging. We all know that hay fever (or *seasonal rhinitis as it is also known*) gives people that classic runny nose and lots of sneezing. Many people develop itchy, watery eyes too, and some get that 'itchy throat' feeling – a very difficult sensation to describe, but those that get it know how irritating it is.

To start with, there are lots of good old fashioned simple steps one can take: vaseline under the nose to trap the

pollen there (instead of inside it); washing your sheets regularly, and washing your hair daily if you've been out and about - this makes sure you get rid of the allergens, and keeps them out of your bed. Wearing sunglasses when it's not sunny can be a difficult look to pull off, but that next person you see wearing Jackie-O's might just be doing it to keep out the pollen, so they've got a legitimate reason.

One of the most common requests I get is for antihistamine tablets. They are a good all round treatment for most symptoms of allergy noted above and they are easy to buy at a pharmacy. Essentially, there are two types of antihistamines - non-drowsy and drowsy. Of the non-drowsy ones, two stand out – loratadine (Claritin) and cetirizine. Both are a once-a-day dose, and both reduce nearly all allergy symptoms noted above. Obviously, most people would prefer a non-drowsy medication to relieve their symptoms, but we should not automatically discount the drowsy ones. I say "ones" but there's only really one I would

suggest and that's chlorphenamine maleate, better known as Piriton. It has been around for a long time, and works very well. It does not have the drowsy effect on everyone so it is definitely worth trying if the non-drowsy alternatives are not working.

For some people though, tablets alone don't make enough of a difference. One of the more targeted treatments is the nasal spray, which is very useful for a persistently runny nose. If that's you, the lining of your nose and throat gets irritated by allergens and then inflamed, which causes it to run. It can run forwards, but also backwards – dripping into your throat, which is also called post-nasal drip. The nasal sprays I suggest contain a small amount of steroid and they calm this inflammation and dry up the runny nose. Pirinase and Beconase are readily available over the counter (the latter is slightly stronger). These can take two weeks of regular use to see the difference, but to get the full effect quickly, use two sprays into each nostril twice a day. Aim one spray upwards, and one spray backwards in

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your nostril, and importantly, do not sniff! It sounds counter-intuitive, but sniffing pulls it all to the back of your throat where it does no good whatsoever.

Eye drops are the other more targeted treatment (for runny, itchy eyes). If your eyes are just a bit dry, from personal experience I'd recommend something like carbomer gel. It's very soothing, and the gel composition means it coats your eye very effectively. If however, your eyes are itchy, watering and a little red you can get specific antihistamine eye drops. Sodium cromoglicate 2% drops are easily available from pharmacies and a great first choice for this.

It's important for me to stress a few things at this point: first, there are no proven long-term side effects of using steroid nasal sprays. Steroids can have quite a stigma attached, and as a result, many people are reluctant to use them. The fact is that used properly, they are an incredibly effective medicine – very much like steroid inhalers for asthma.

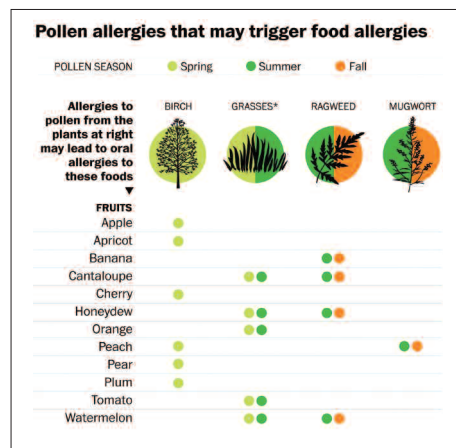
The second point to stress is that it is also perfectly safe to use antihistamine tablets in conjunction with steroid nasal sprays and eye drops altogether, or in any combination. Some people might find the tablet does it all, but others may need the addition of the sprays/eye drops - it is very much dependent on the individual.

Thirdly, I just wanted to briefly talk about the use of the above in pregnancy. I see a lot of ladies who suffer from these allergy symptoms and

they are understandably concerned about taking these medicines while pregnant. Ultimately, the safest advice you'll get is that no medicine is guaranteed to be safe during pregnancy. That being said however, there is evidence to show that chlorphenamine and loratadine (*a.k.a. Piriton and Clarityn*) are not associated with any fetal abnormalities. In the same vein, nasal beconase and cromoglicate eye drops are also considered relatively safe to use, with no evidence to date of harm being caused.

If you have tried most of the above, but are still not getting adequate relief, then it is time to see a doctor. Currently, further medications a GP can prescribe are more effective versions of the above tablets, sprays and drops (e.g. *fexofenadine, avamys spray, or olapatadine drops*). If the above haven't worked, then these medications on prescription almost always do, and very well indeed. Some people find they become wheezy in the chest with hayfever, which we can prescribe inhalers for, but this may need to be looked into a little further to differentiate allergic wheezing from something else like asthma.

For that small minority who still aren't symptom-free, hope is not lost. New therapies such as immuno-modulation are available – a procedure carried out by specialist allergy doctors, which aims to desensitise your immune system gradually by exposing your body to increasing doses of the allergen in question.



Ultimately, allergies can take the enjoyment out of life. With the above steps however, hopefully they can be dealt with quickly and effectively.

All the information contained in this article is intended for your general knowledge and is not a substitute for medical advice or treatment. FOCUS Magazine cannot and does not give medical advice. This article is not intended to take the place of your doctor's advice. Please discuss your allergy symptoms and needs with your doctor or healthcare provider.



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