

ANTIHISTAMINES

What will they do for me?

Antihistamines prevent the symptoms of hay fever and other allergies. Although they can be used to control symptoms once they start, they are much more effective when used to prevent symptoms.

How do they work?

They work in your bloodstream to block one of the body's chemicals called histamine. Histamine is the substance which causes your allergy symptoms. When you are exposed to allergens, histamine is released in your bloodstream. It then goes to all parts of your body to cause your particular symptoms. These may be itching, watery eyes, tightness of the chest and mucus in the lungs, or swelling of mouth, nose, eye, or other tissues. When histamine is blocked by antihistamine, you can avoid having symptoms.

How are they taken?

Antihistamines come in liquid, tablet, and capsule form. There are short-acting (last 4-6 hours) as well as long-acting (last 12 hours) types.

What about side effects?

Antihistamines are thought of as safe drugs because there are no long-term side effects.

Drowsiness is a common complaint with these drugs. Often, patients use a trial and error method to find one or more types which do not cause drowsiness. Other complaints, though rare, include blurred vision, "prostrate trouble" in older men, and hyperactivity in children.

What else should I know?

Drug Interactions: Antihistamines add to the effect of sleeping pills, tranquilizers, and alcohol. Be sure to check with your doctor before using any of these together with your antihistamine.

Combination Drugs: Antihistamines are often combined with decongestants. If you take a combination drug, you need to know about decongestants and their side effects.

Tolerance: Antihistamines come in six general classes. If you use a single type for a long time, it may lose its effect. This is called tolerance. Switching to another antihistamine of a different class will often solve the problem, but switching to one of the same class will not. It is a good idea to know the classes and which preparation when you build up a tolerance to the one you are taking.