



Allergies are a common problem for most patients. Lots of factors play into what makes someone's allergies increase. There are many remedies available to treat this problem – both prescription and over the counter (OTC). First, let's look at OTC medications. Many choices are available at various prices, strengths, and forms. Some of the types of drugs available are antihistamines, decongestants, combination drugs, corticosteroids, bronchodilators and allergy shots. What exactly are these drugs and how can they help patients deal with some very aggravating symptoms?

Antihistamines

Antihistamines can be taken in the form of a pill, liquid, nasal spray, or eye drops. They work in response to an overproduction of histamine in the body. When patients are exposed to a particular allergen, the immune system goes into overdrive trying to fight off the cause of the allergy. In addition, immune system cells called mast cells release a chemical called histamine. When histamine is released it attaches to receptors in blood vessels, causing them to get bigger and resulting in redness, swelling, itching, and changes in the body's secretions. Antihistamines work correctly when they block histamine receptors and prevent or reduce allergy symptoms. Despite what the medicine bottle says, drugs can work differently on different patients. There are some cases in which a certain antihistamine does not work at all or does not work as effectively as it should. As with many medications trial and error can be very helpful in the treatment of various allergies. Some of the most popular OTC choices are discussed below.

Allegra is sold as: Allegra, Allegra D, and Children's Allegra. Children's Allegra is available in tablets; oral disintegrating or a liquid suspension. Allegra's generic name is fexofenadine and brand names are Allegra and Allegra ODT.

Benadryl, also known as diphenhydramine, is a histamine blocker that negates the effects of histamine in the body. Benadryl thus produces a reduction or cessation of allergy symptoms. The most common forms of Benadryl are the pill and liquid form, but there are other forms as well, such as creams and ointments to treat skin allergies. Oral forms of Benadryl increase drowsiness so care and consideration should be taken when driving a car or operating heavy machinery. Pharmacists and pharmacy technicians should always double-check to be sure auxiliary labels read "may cause drowsiness." Technicians may believe everyone has taken Benadryl, but never take that for granted. Refer patients to the pharmacist for recommendations. Auxiliary labels must be placed on the correct medicine bottles to ensure patient safety. Checking the accuracy and correctness of labels should be of top priority for pharmacy staff.

Loratadine is the generic name for the widely-known antihistamine Claritin. Claritin is used for the treatment of seasonal allergies such as sneezing, itching, watery eyes and runny nose. Claritin is also used to treat skin hives, itching, and those with ongoing skin conditions. Claritin is available for both children and adults and is available in many forms.

Zyrtec or cetirizine is the generic name for Zyrtec. Zyrtec is used to manage allergy symptoms of sneezing, itching, watery eyes, runny nose and hives. It is also used to treat swelling and itching from hives. Zyrtec is manufactured in various forms to suit patients' individual allergy symptoms. Some forms available are pills, liquid, chewable tablets and perfect measure. Perfect measures are pre-filled spoons patients can take with them on-the-go. All of these medications are fairly inexpensive and can be found at local pharmacies and discount stores.

Although antihistamines can be helpful in treating allergies, they also have side effects. Some possible side effects may include headache, nervousness, tiredness, fatigue, abdominal pain, diarrhea, dry mouth, sore throat, hoarseness, eye redness, blurred vision, nosebleed and skin rash. More serious side effects can occur such as rapid heartbeat/heart rate, jaundice, seizures and a feeling of faintness. Side effects should be reported to a doctor or pharmacist as well as to the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) by calling 1-800-FDA-1088 or by going to www.fda.gov/medwatch.

Antihistamines are also available in prescription form. A few of the prescriptions available are Clarinex, Vistaril, and Xyzal. These prescription counterparts generally work the same as OTC medications, but may be stronger than OTC medications depending on the milligram strength.

Decongestants

Pharmacy technicians also need to know about decongestants and how they work on the body. Decongestants are sometimes given with antihistamines to help in the fight against allergies. They work to shrink swollen nasal tissues and blood vessels to relieve allergy symptoms. Patients are then able to breathe bet-