It’s allergy season! But for some, it can always be allergy season. Choosing an allergy medication to treat your symptoms can be confusing and overwhelming. When you walk into a pharmacy, chances are there’s an entire aisle or wall of options, so how do you know which one is best for you? Well, it’s your lucky day. Read along for some info, tips and tricks about choosing an allergy medication!

**Symptoms of allergies**
Before choosing a medication, it is best to understand what exactly is causing your allergies. Common allergens are pollens (from trees, grasses, weeds), molds, dust, and animal dander. Your immune system reacts to these allergens by releasing substances AKA your body’s defense mechanisms. One of these substances is histamine. Histamine causes nerve stimulation in your nasal passages, which can cause sneezing, and also fills the nose with fluid and cells to fight said invaders (allergens). As a result, your mucous membranes become inflamed and in turn produce mucus. Said mucus then brings on the common symptoms of allergies: stuffy or runny nose, nasal congestion, sneezing, watery or itchy eyes, coughing and sometimes a sore throat.

**What are my non-pharmacologic options?**
- Avoidance of allergens or triggers
- Nasal irrigation like NeilMed Sinus Rinse or Neti Pot
- Steamy shower
There are many different options of over-the-counter (OTC) drugs that can fight allergies. The most common family of medications are "anti-histamines." These medications block the effects of histamines—all the common allergy symptoms. Another option to fight symptoms before it even releases histamines are with corticosteroid nasal sprays. Some OTC options are fluticasone propionate (Flonase) and triamcinolone (Nasacort). Of course there are things to be cautious of, so continue reading below!

**ANTIHISTAMINES**

Certain anti-histamines, known as first-generation antihistamines, cause drowsiness and possible confusion. These are a better option if you had a long day of yard work, lots of grass and pollen, and are done for the day—calling it a night!

The most common first-gen agent is diphenhydramine (Benadryl).

Second-generation antihistamines are most likely the best options for students (and everyone else who needs to fight their symptom and carry on with their day) since they cause less drowsiness! These options are fexofenadine (Allegra), loratidine (Claritin), and cetirizine (Zyrtec). Another benefit of the second-generation antihistamines is they are more potent, requiring fewer doses throughout the day. With that being said, they are more expensive. Yes, there are multiple other medications out there, but the three listed above are a great start. There aren’t many differences between the three, so choose one, and use it for at least 4 weeks to determine if it works for you. If it doesn’t, try one another option.

Options for itchy/watery-eyes: ketotifen (Systane Zaditor)
**CORTICOSTEROIDS**

OTC corticosteroid options usually come in nasal spray form. Fluticasone propionate (Flonase) and triamcinolone (Nasacort) are the most common. It is important to use them as directed on the bottle. Note that it may take 5-7 days to experience relief of symptoms. An important side effect to note is drying of the nasal passages which can cause bloody noses.

**DECONGESTANTS**

Pseudoephedrine (Sudafed) or phenylephrine (Sudafed PE) are common OTC decongestants. They help narrow the blood vessels within your nasal passages to reduce inflammation and provide relief. However, decongestants have many side effects: raised blood pressure, increased heart rate, insomnia, and anxiety. If you have heart disease, high blood pressure, angina or diabetes, decongestants are not recommended! Decongestant nasal sprays if used longer than 3-5 days can cause rebound congestion – greater inflammation than experienced initially. It should be noted that purchasing Sudafed or any other behind the counter decongestant (Zyrtec-D, Claritin-D, Allegra-D) requires a government issued ID.

**WHEN TO SEE A DOCTOR**

If you have been treating your allergy symptoms for over a month and have not experienced relief or are concerned about side effects, seek help from your doctor. Also, if you have any pre-existing health conditions (asthma, high blood pressure, diabetes, glaucoma, etc.), contact your doctor before starting an OTC allergy medication.

And don’t forget, you can always ask the Pharmacist!

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