

# Histamines—Seasonal Allergy - Friend or Foe?



Health Matters

By Kerry Sauser

We all breathe a sigh of relief as spring releases its greenery and flowers upon us. However, that sigh is often directly followed by the sneezes, sniffles and watery eyes of seasonal allergies. Just what is the cause of all this commotion in our eyes, throats and noses, and is there anything we can do to tone that activity down?

Many of us find that certain substances we breathe, eat or touch—like pollen, dust, pet dander or select foods—can cause our bodies to react. For us, such things cause an inflammatory response that tells specialized cells in our immune system to release a substance called histamine. Histamine is part of the immune system's first line of defense, and the cells that produce it are especially numerous at sites of potential injury—the nose, mouth, feet, internal body surfaces and blood vessels. When histamine is released, it dilates small blood vessels and increases capillary permeability so that white blood cells can move into the affected area more easily and protect tissues.

With seasonal allergies, inhaled irritants trigger histamine release. Histamine release then causes blood vessels of the nose to dilate and the capillaries to leak—resulting in a runny nose, watery eyes and congestion. Sneezing occurs due to histamine-associated neural stimulation. In the lungs, histamines constrict the smooth muscles of the bronchial tubes and reduce the volume of air inhaled to limit exposure to the airborne irritant, causing chest tightness and difficulty breathing.

You may be saying "Histamines may have a purpose, but I can live without them if it means no sniffles." Don't be too hasty. Besides being involved in the immune response, histamines also have some very important functions in other parts of the body, including the gastro-intestinal tract and the brain. Our stomach lining contains cells in the gastric glands that secrete histamines also. When

food is swallowed, these particular histamines cue the stomach to release stomach acid and digest the food. Without sufficient histamine cues to the stomach, nutrient absorption is limited, digestion is incomplete and food can instead putrefy in the digestive tract and release damage-causing toxins into the body. An interesting side note here is that some foods, particularly fermented foods like sauerkraut and yogurt, contain histamines in them, and are sometimes eaten to facilitate digestion.

In another part of our bodies, the brain, histamines have a very important role as neurotransmitters. They are involved in modulating our ability to wake from sleep and stay alert throughout the day—they even play a role in controlling motion sickness. Studies show that neurons in the brain that produce histamine fire most rapidly when we are awake, slow during periods of relaxation, and stop completely during sleep. Without histamines to stimulate the neurons in our brain, we feel groggy and unable to focus. (This is why anti-histamine medications warn us not to operate machinery while taking them.)

As our knowledge expands, histamines grow in importance. They have now been linked to memory, learning and reduction of our susceptibility to convulsions, drug sensitivities, and stress. And gentlemen, there are also suggestions that libido loss and erectile failure may be associated with histamine antagonists such as cimetidine (Tagamet) and ranitidine (Zantac).

Commonly used antihistamines (epinephrine list...) help with sniffles, but also shut down the very important functions of histamines in our bodies—and that can be detrimental. Is there a way to tame our runny nose and watery eyes without impacting the beneficial role histamine plays? The answer is yes. Histamines may cause the outward responses to the seasonal allergies you feel, but they really aren't the bad guy. Seasonal allergy problems actually stem from imbalances in the body's defense systems—the immune system, respiratory system, liver and adrenal glands. Building up these underlying systems will help keep histamines at acceptable levels and thus minimize the problematic symptoms of

seasonal allergies.

Follow are some effective allergy fighters—free of detrimental side effects—that have proven effective with my patients:

**Homeopathic Remedies.** These remedies have no side effects, no interactions and are safe for children. They desensitize the body to allergens by exposing it to nearly undetectable amounts of safe substances similar to the allergen.

**Herbs:** Echinacea is a powerful support to the immune system. Note that the source and manufacture of this herb affects its potency significantly. Stinging Nettle Leaf. Clinical results show that this herb supports nasal passageway health. Fenugreek seed softens and dissolves mucus to help the body expel it.

**Nutritional Supplements:** Quercetin, a substance naturally found in onions stabilizes cells that produce histamines and have been shown to inhibit compounds that affect sinus and respiratory health. Calcium has been shown to increase immune efficiency. Make sure to use calcium lactate or calcium citrate—bio-available forms of the nutrient. Vitamin A benefits eyes and mucus membranes. Vitamin C supports the immune response and the adrenal glands.

(There are many products available that contain different combinations of these ingredients and others to achieve effective treatment in an easy-to-use form. Ask your health care professional for advice if you are unsure of which is best for you.)

Minimize exposure to pollen: Shower before bed to remove pollen from your hair and skin. While you are at it, shampoo your indoor/outdoor pets. Pollen sticks to their fur, too. Avoid outdoors during peak pollen time, or do outside activities early in the morning when pollen counts are lowest. Clean window screens and furnace filters of mold and dust. Use diet as your ally. Stay away from foods that cause inflammation (such as sugar) or contribute to mucus production (dairy products) during the allergy season.

Don't take out your frustration with seasonal allergies on histamine. Instead support your immune system, and remember that histamine is your friend, not your foe!

Until next month... Heal well, be well...naturally!

K.S.

(Dr. Kerry Sauser, ARNP, ND, PhD, practices functional health care at the Natural Health Center in Atlantic. Her offices are located in the Complementary Care Center at the corner of 2nd and Linn Street. The CCC is open to the public and hosts a natural food store, and health care services including, massage, Ortho-Bionomy, digital thermography, reflexology, hypnosis, and acupuncture.)