

allergy aware

If you're sneezing, have a stuffy nose and itchy eyes, you probably have allergies and need relief. Here's what you need to know before reaching for an over-the-counter allergy medication. **By Wendy Haaf**

Walmart Live Better: *When should I see my doctor before taking an over-the-counter medication to relieve allergy symptoms?*

Myralie Sanchez: Always see a paediatrician if your child is under two. You should also see your physician if allergy-like symptoms are accompanied by one or more of the following: a fever or sore throat; if you've lost your sense of smell and food tastes odd; if you're pregnant or nursing; or if you have asthma that's not well controlled.

WLB: *Other than the time of year, are there clues I might have a year-round allergy rather than a seasonal one?*

MS: If you find yourself sneezing or with a runny nose year-round, it's safe to assume you have perennial (year-round) allergies. If certain times or plants trigger your symptoms, your allergies are likely seasonal.

WLB: *How do I choose a medication?*

MS: Oral antihistamines are a good go-to for a mild to moderate runny nose, sneezing and itchiness. There are two options: non-sedating and sedating. The

newer, second-generation, non-drowsy options (such as cetirizine or loratadine) are usually the better option—and not just because they don't make you sleepy. The older-generation drugs (such as diphenhydramine or chlorpheniramine) can interact with conditions such as glaucoma, and they're generally not recommended for older people. (That said, if you have a health issue, or take other medications, it's safest to check with your pharmacist before taking any over-the-counter product. Your pharmacist can also tell you which type of antihistamine is which.) The non-sedating medications are more convenient because you don't have to take them multiple times a day. The downside is the second-generation products cost more, but there are less expensive generic options that contain the same active ingredients as their name-brand counterparts.

For moderate to severe nasal congestion due to allergies, corticosteroid sprays are the drug of choice: There are two available without prescription, as well as some your pharmacist can prescribe. Your pharmacist



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can help you to choose the corticosteroid spray that is right for you, depending on factors such as your age and symptoms. And be aware it can take a few days for the spray to start working, and several days to a week of continuous use—taken at the same time each day—to take maximum effect. (Avoid non-corticosteroid decongestants, which are not suitable for use beyond three days.) If there is no symptom improvement after three weeks, you should go see your family doctor.

WLB: *How can I get maximum benefit from my medication? And how long should I take it?*

MS: If you know you have seasonal allergies, start

taking medications a week before the date your symptoms typically appear: For example, with a tree pollen allergy, that might be early March. It's usually fine to take them for as long as needed, but you should inform your physician at your next appointment of any product that you're taking on a regular basis. On the other hand, if you've been using an over-the-counter allergy product at the correct dose for two weeks and it's not helping, it's time to see your doctor, since prescription treatments (and testing to find out what you're allergic to) may offer more relief. However, on the whole, a lot of these symptoms can be easily managed with help from your pharmacist. ■