Anti-allergy medication for the office worker

Introduction

An allergy is an abnormal reaction of the body’s immune system to a usually harmless substance in the environment. Persistent allergy symptoms are debilitating and treatment may be required to allow the patient to continue with his or her daily life.

More about allergies

Allergic reactions are sensitivities to substances called allergens which come into contact with the skin, nose, eyes, respiratory tract and gastrointestinal tract. Allergens can be breathed into the lungs, swallowed or injected.

Common allergens include:
- Pollens from grass, trees and flowers
- Mould
- Animal dander
- Dust
- Food, including fish, shellfish, nuts, wheat and milk
- Medication, including penicillin and aspirin
- Insect stings, including those of bees and wasps
- Chemicals
- Cosmetics
- Smoke
- Perfume.

Symptoms of allergic reactions vary according to which body system is affected, and range from mild to life-threatening, depending on the severity of the allergy. Typical symptoms of mild to moderate allergic reactions following exposure to an allergen include:

- Itchy, watery eyes
- A runny nose
- Sneezing
- A tight chest and wheezing
- Rashes
- Hives (a raised red patchy rash)
- Stomach pain, nausea and vomiting.

Treatment

Several medications are available to help alleviate the above symptoms of mild to moderate allergies. Severe allergic reactions or anaphylaxis is beyond the scope of this article.

Antihistamines

The histamine that is released during an allergic reaction is responsible for causing redness, swelling, itching and a runny or blocked nose. Antihistamines are medicines that block the effects of histamine and prevent or treat these symptoms.

Antihistamines may be used orally or in the form of nose and eye preparations. First-generation or the older oral antihistamines include diphenhydramine and chlorpheniramine. They may cause significant drowsiness in many patients. Therefore, they are not suitable for daytime use by the office worker. They may offer a benefit by improving sleep if taken at night.

The newer, second-generation antihistamines, such as loratadine and cetirizine, do not cause drowsiness and are suitable for use in people with symptoms of allergies who still need to work during the day.

Antihistamine nasal sprays, e.g. azelastine (Rhinolast®) help to ease sneezing and an itchy and runny nose caused by allergies. Antihistamine eye drops, e.g. azelastine (Optilast®) are used for red, itchy and swollen eyes caused by allergies.

Decongestants

Oral and nasal decongestants are administered to relieve a blocked nose. Decongestant eye products ease the symptoms of red and itchy eyes. However, decongestant nasal sprays and eyedrops should not be used for more than a few days as longer
term use may make the symptoms worse. Patients who are pregnant or have high blood pressure should use these products with caution.

**Corticosteroids**

Corticosteroid preparations reduce inflammation. Intranasal corticosteroids are used to treat nasal symptoms associated with persistent allergic rhinitis. Inhaled preparations alleviate the symptoms triggered by airborne allergens, and are often part of daily asthma treatment. Corticosteroid creams may be used for allergic skin reactions, such as an allergic rash and itching.

**Mast cell stabilisers**

Histamine is released from cells in the body called mast cells. Therefore, mast cell stabilising medications, such as sodium cromoglicate, e.g. Vividrin® nasal spray and Cromohexal® eyedrops, and lodoxamide, e.g. Alomide® eyedrops, can be useful in preventing and managing nasal and eye symptoms from allergies. Some newer eyedrops contain medicine that has both antihistamine and mast cell stabilising effects, e.g. olopatadine (Patanol® eyedrops).

**Choice of medication for the office worker**

Choice of anti-allergy medication depends on the symptoms of allergy experienced by the patient. Nonsedating antihistamines are preferred by most patients, including the office worker, who needs to function optimally during the day. Nasal and eye products are recommended for people experiencing troublesome nasal and eye symptoms from allergies. Intranasal corticosteroids remain the first-choice treatment for patients with persistent symptoms of allergic rhinitis.

**Bibliography**