

HERBAL TREATMENT OF ALLERGIES

Q.

I suffer from itchy eyes and sneeze a lot around this time of year. Can any herbs help with allergies?

A.

Yes, this is likely to be an allergy to flower, tree or grass pollen. In Britain about 90 per cent of hay fever sufferers are allergic to grass pollen and around 25 per cent are allergic to Birch tree pollen. What happens is that your body releases large numbers of antibodies to fight the allergen but these also produce a substance called histamine. This causes swelling and irritation of the lining of the eyes, nose and airways. Some women find that their hay fever symptoms worsen before their period and this can be due to an increase in the hormone progesterone, which affects fluid balance in the body.

Decongestants, antihistamines and immunotherapy from your G.P. work quite well for some people but they only treat the symptoms rather than the cause. Also, there can be side effects – raised blood pressure or insomnia with decongestants and drowsiness with anti-histamines. It's possible that they may weaken your immune system over time.

As a medical herbalist, my advice and treatment would be to strengthen your immune system with diet and herbs. Firstly, increase your vitamin C and flavonoid intake (which are effective anti-histamines) with foods such as green and red peppers, tomatoes, red onions, potatoes, watercress and citrus fruits. Both work together in preventing the inflammation caused by histamine.

Also rich in vitamin C and flavonoids is the common stinging nettle, (*Urtica dioica*), which is one of many plants used effectively by herbalists to treat allergic rhinitis (hay fever). Although regarded as a weed, it has been valued throughout history for a variety of ailments and has a reputation as a spring vegetable, the young leaves being cooked and eaten like spinach. It contains several vitamins and minerals and can be a treatment for nosebleeds, heavy periods, anaemia and diarrhoea due to its astringent properties. A handful can be made into a tea or added to soups. If you do collect the leaves, make very sure that they are not polluted by traffic, dogs and other animals or chemical sprays and wear gloves! Alternatively, you can buy dried nettles from a herbalist.

Other herbs that help with hay fever are Eyebright, Elderflower, Echinacea, Garlic, Plantain, and Ground Ivy. Garlic should preferably be eaten raw and can be crushed and sprinkled onto food (eat some Parsley with it to remove the smell on your breath if you want). The other herbs can be drunk as teas or taken as tinctures.

Some other words of advice - consult a qualified health practitioner before taking herbs. Although herbal remedies can be bought over the counter or on the Internet, you may be using the wrong herbs and wasting your money, or even doing some

harm. Other medication you may be taking could interact with some herbs and cause side effects. Some herbs may not be suitable if you are pregnant or breastfeeding. Getting the correct dose is also important, especially for children and the elderly. However, in general, herbs are safe and effective as medicines and can also be used to complement a normal balanced diet to improve your health.

Moira Ross
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