

Natural Relief for Allergies

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Although generally not life-threatening, allergies can ruin a perfectly good day and make anyone miserable. An allergy is an overreaction of the immune system to a substance called an antigen, something that is foreign to the body but otherwise harmless (e.g., pollen from grasses and flowers, etc.). In an allergic individual, the harmless antigen becomes an allergen—a substance that initiates an allergic reaction. The term allergy is of Greek origin and means “abnormal response.”

According to the Asthma and Allergy Foundation of America, allergies are the sixth leading cause of chronic disease in America with an annual cost exceeding \$18 billion. Allergies are believed to complicate and even handicap the lives of nearly 50 million children and adults. The symptoms, or allergic reactions, may include sneezing, watery eyes and nasal congestion, as in hay fever and allergic rhinitis; a rash, upset stomach and itchy swellings on the skin (hives), as with some food or drug allergies; or spasms within the lungs that interfere with breathing, as in allergic asthma.

Consequently, a significant number of consumers who walk into your store have the potential to be allergy customers. While these customers may not have come in looking for natural support for allergy relief, an attentive natural products salesperson can certainly take note of any allergic symptomology that customers exhibit and take the opportunity to open up a discussion about the issue. In any case, once it is clear that a customer is interested in natural support for allergy relief, do you have a plan? Are you clear on what types of products to offer? Following is a discussion about natural substances with significant potential to provide allergy relief. What’s more, you probably sell most or all of them in your store now. Before reviewing those substances, however, let’s first take a look at what’s going on with the immune system whose overreaction causes allergic reactions.

Understanding Immune Function

The body’s immune defenses may be grouped into two broad areas: nonspecific and specific. These defenses provide you with your immunity—the ability to overcome the effects of certain harmful microorganisms (e.g., bacteria, viruses). Non-specific defenses include certain mechanical and chemical factors in the skin and mucous membranes of the body (such as in the lungs), which are involved in combating the initial attempt of a microbe to invade. The specific defenses involve the production of antibodies by certain organs of the immune system, including the thymus gland, bone marrow, the spleen, lymph nodes and the lymphatic system in general.

Special white blood cells called macrophages are part of the non-specific immune defenses. Macrophages are not

found in the bloodstream but at locations where body organs interface with the environment or the bloodstream, such as in the lungs, spleen, bone marrow and liver. Macrophages have special jobs including identifying foreign invaders (such as pollen or bacteria) and helping to determine if they are good guys or bad guys. If the macrophages decide the foreign invader is a harmful microbe, then they may devour it. If the macrophages wrongly identify harmless antigens as bad guys, they set in motion inflammatory processes, including the activation of mast cells. Mast cells are found in connective tissues, and their contents (e.g., histamines, leukotrienes) along with those of basophils (mast cells’ counterparts in the blood), are responsible for the symptoms of allergy.

Although this is a very simplified explanation, and the allergic process involves other immune cells and activities, this should provide sufficient background to proceed into a discussion of natural substances for allergy relief.

Echinacea

Echinacea is an herb most commonly associated with treating or preventing the common cold and other respiratory infections. However, a review of scientific literature published between 1980 and 2003 revealed Echinacea is one of the most common herbs used to treat upper respiratory tract allergies.¹ These applications are valid considering Echinacea has been shown to promote innate immune response.² As a matter of fact, among the many pharmacological properties reported, macrophage activation has been demonstrated most convincingly.³ It is this property of acting on non-specific immunity that suggests a positive role for Echinacea in modulating immune function in allergies,⁴ and offers support to Echinacea’s widespread use for this purpose. Specifically, the concept is: if macrophages can do a better job at correctly identifying harmless antigenic substances (such as pollens) as being harmless rather than identifying them as foreign invaders (allergens), then the whole allergic process may be avoided.

It is important to note the popular misconception that Echinacea should only be used for a limited period of time, otherwise it will cease its effectiveness. This misconception was based upon misinterpretations of a specific study on Echinacea which demonstrated decreased immune activity after about 10 days.⁵ However, if the study is carefully read, it is clear that the Echinacea was only administered for five days, after which point it was discontinued. Only when it was discontinued did immune activity begin to decline; and even then it still remained elevated above normal for a few days.⁶ Furthermore, other research (as well as a history of traditional use) supports the effectiveness of Echinacea when used for extended periods of time.

Quercetin

Quercetin, a plant flavonoid, has antihistamine and has anti-inflammatory properties. In fact, flavonoids have some of the most well-documented evidence published to date of natural compounds with regard to inhibitory action on mast cells and allergic symptoms;⁷ and quercetin is thought to be the most effective antihistaminic and antiallergic flavonoid.⁸ In a Japanese study of mast cells from nasal mucosa of individuals with perennial allergic rhinitis, quercetin significantly inhibited histamine release.⁹ Quercetin's effect almost doubled that of the drug sodium cromoglycate at the same concentration. Quercetin acts by inhibiting the release of histamine and other inflammatory molecules from mast cells.

Stinging Nettles

In a double blind, randomized study of 98 individuals with allergic rhinitis, 300 mg of freeze-dried stinging nettles was rated significantly higher than placebo in reducing allergic symptoms after taking it for one week.^{10,11} Among the subjects, 58 percent rated it moderately or highly effective, and 48 percent indicated it was equally or more effective than previously used medicines. Based on this study, at least 600 mg daily is recommended.

Aller-7®

Aller-7®, a botanical formula consisting of seven medicinal plant extracts (*P. emblica*, *T. chebula*, *T. Bellerica*, *A. lebbek*, *P. nigrum*, *Z. officinale* and *P. longum*) was developed to help counter the common symptoms of hay fever such as sneezing, running nose, itchy and watery eyes. Research has demonstrated the ability of Aller-7 to intervene in key processes that underlie the allergic response. It exhibits potent antihistaminic, anti-inflammatory, anti-spasmodic (bronchial artery relaxation) and antioxidant activity, as well as the capacity to stabilize histamine-releasing mast cells. Broad spectrum safety has also been shown. Double blind, placebo-controlled studies were subsequently conducted to assess its effectiveness. In a study of 42 subjects, nasal symptom scores significantly improved over a three-month period in those receiving Aller-7. Finally, a multi-center clinical trial involving 545 patients was conducted for a 12-week period. Compared to those in the placebo group, patients taking Aller-7 experienced significant improvement in nasal congestion, sneezing, runny nose, peak nasal flow rate and mucociliary clearance. These clinical findings support the safety and effectiveness of Aller-7.¹³ It should be noted that this herbal preparation is best used chronically rather than acutely. It should also be taken in doses consistent with the clinical studies. One should take 660 mg twice daily for six to 12 weeks, then 330 mg twice daily thereafter.

Picrorhiza

Picrorhiza kurroa is a well-known herb in Ayurvedic medicine, used traditionally to treat disorders of the liver and upper respiratory tract, as well as other disorders.¹⁴ Research on bronchial obstruction has shown that constituents of picrorhiza prevented allergen- and platelet-activating factor-induced bronchial obstruction when given to guinea pigs; and other research shows that picrorhiza inhibited histamine release.¹⁵ When given to mice and rats, picrorhiza extract resulted in a decrease in mast cell activity.¹⁶ It is interesting to note that picrorhiza has also been shown to have immunomodulating properties, which may be another mechanism by which it is beneficial for allergies.^{17,18}

Scutellaria

Scutellaria baicalensis, or Baikal Scullcap, is an herb used in combinations in traditional Chinese medicine to treat allergies and has been documented in research as such to treat allergic rhinitis.¹⁹ In vitro,

anti-allergy actions have been documented with *Scutellaria*.²⁰ In addition, *Scutellaria* has been shown to have an immunomodulating effect on certain cells in allergic individuals.²¹ Antiallergic components of *Scutellaria* have been shown to inhibit the release of inflammatory leukotrienes.²² Components of *Scutellaria* have also been shown to reduce allergic contractions in the lungs of sensitized animals.

Butterbur

As a proprietary extract called Ze 339, the herb butterbur has been shown to be clinically efficient in the treatment of allergic rhinitis (hay fever).²³ Research has demonstrated butterbur is effective in reducing allergic symptoms, as well as significantly reducing histamine and leukotrienes levels after only five days of use.²⁴ The clinical efficacy of butterbur extract was compared with an established antihistamine drug (Cetirizine) in a double-blind study to evaluate its effectiveness in the treatment of allergic rhinitis.²⁵ Butterbur was equally as effective as the drug for this purpose, but without the sedative effects of the antihistamine.

A.Vogel (Bioforce) Allergy Relief

Our own personal and professional experience with the A.Vogel homeopathic remedy Allergy Relief (previously Pollinosan) has often led us to recommend this product for individuals with allergies. A homeopathic preparation of mixed grass pollens, this product is marketed for the relief of discomfort associated with hayfever and similar airborne allergies. We have found it to be especially effective for allergic "itchy eyes." The liquid form of this product tends to provide relief very quickly—often within seconds. Aside from our own experiences with A.Vogel Allergy Relief, a randomized, double blind, placebo-controlled trial of 144 active hay fever sufferers was conducted using this product back in 1986.²⁶ Scientists compared the effects of this homeopathic preparation with a placebo preparation. The homeopathically treated patients showed a significant reduction in both patient- and doctor-assessed symptom scores (six times as much improvement as those receiving the placebo), and the significance of this response was increased when results were adjusted to take account for pollen count. Although more of the patients receiving the homeopathic remedy experienced initial aggravation of symptoms than those patients in the placebo group, this was followed by a marked and sustained improvement that led the researchers to conclude that homeopathic remedies could halve the need for antihistamines for hay fever sufferers. While space only allows a review of one homeopathic remedy for allergies, that is not to say that one's shelves are not full of others as effective.

Any or all of the aforementioned natural substances may help to provide your customers with significant relief from their allergic symptoms. It may be possible to find most or all of the herbs in a single product, although it may be necessary to combine products to create an effective supplementation program. Certainly the homeopathic medicine will need to be used separately.

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