

Finding Relief From Hay Fever

HAY FEVER IS BAD, but decongestants and antihistamines can be even more irritating. A growing array of homeopathic allergy remedies promise relief without the dryness, drowsiness or jitters sometimes caused by conventional medicines.

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Hay fever strikes when your immune system interprets an allergen—usually pollen—as a dangerous substance. In response, your body releases chemicals called histamines, which cause congestion, sneezing and other symptoms. The homeopathic treatments promise relief without the side effects. Many also claim to trigger an immune response that helps fight off allergies in the long run.

Like all homeopathic remedies, these follow the principle of “like cures like”—that is, an illness is treated with natural substances that would, in large doses, bring on the symptoms of the illness. For hay-fever sufferers, this means ingesting tablets, liquids or sprays containing tinctures of plants such as red onion—used to treat watery eyes—or of allergy-causing pollens. Homeopathy claims this exposure stimulates the body’s self-healing capacities, spurring a resistance to the sickness.

Products made by companies including King Bio Natural Medicine and Botanical Laboratories Inc. bundle several of the most commonly used tinctures into a single treatment. Available in health-food stores and online, these treatments usually cost between \$7 and \$10 a piece.

Whether these actually work is up for debate. Homeopaths like to point out that, unlike trendy fringe therapies, their craft was developed 200 years ago. Since then, they say, its effectiveness has been verified by first-hand observation and small experiments called “provings.” But even though many homeopaths also are licensed physicians, the medical establishment considers homeopathy to be outside the mainstream, and only a small percentage of homeopathic ingredients have been clinically tested. So far, results are mixed.

A 1986 study by David Rellly of the University of Glasgow, Scotland, treated 144 hay-fever patients with



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a homeopathic mixture of grass pollens. Compared with a placebo, the treatment significantly reduced patients’ symptoms and halved their need for decongestants. A study by German researchers in 1999 found that Heel Inc.’s *Luffa Compositum*

nasal spray, which includes tinctures of the plants *Luffa operculata* and *Galphimia glauca*, among others, nearly eliminated hay-fever symptoms and was as effective as conventional sprays.

Homeopaths often point to these studies as evidence that all homeopathic remedies are effective, but other treatments have been found useless. In 2000, a Norwegian researcher found a homeopathic preparation of birch pollen had no beneficial effect on people with birch-pollen allergies.

Within the medical establishment, these disparate findings are seen as evidence that large-scale clinical trials of each homeopathic remedy, if not each active ingredient, are needed to conclusively determine which treatments work. While adverse reactions to homeopathic products are rare, many doctors are disturbed by claims of zero side effects. Dr. Stephen Wasserman, an allergy specialist and professor of medicine at the University of California-San Diego, maintains that it could be dangerous to expose an allergic person to the allergen that afflicts them. “The fact that these treatments are natural doesn’t make them safe,” he says.

Consumers should proceed with caution. If you dread taking conventional medicines and want to try the alternatives, have a certified homeopath design a personalized treatment plan. But always check with your family doctor before taking any new remedies, and don’t throw away the Claritin just yet.

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