Nutritional help for hayfever and summer allergies

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Allergic rhinitis, or hay fever, is the result of the immune system being triggered to fight off pollen, causing antibodies immunoglobulin-E (IgE) to be produced. The IgE stimulates the release of histamine, which is responsible for the irritating symptoms of sneezing, itching, tickly throat and congestion. So inhibiting histamine curbs your miserable allergy symptoms.

Routine medical anti-histamines may cause drowsiness and habitual use of corticosteroid nasal sprays can promote rebound congestion. Alternatively, beta-glucans can provide safe, welcome relief without adverse consequences. Beta-glucans are polysaccharide nutrients in foods such as mushrooms, yeasts, grains and shellfish.

These 1,3/1,6 beta glucans are capable of binding to cell surface-receptors and diminishing the symptoms caused by IgE production, especially histamine release. They should not be confused with beta 1,3/1,4 glucans, obtained from cereals such as oats and wheat, which have a different molecular structure and are useful to help support healthy blood cholesterol levels.

A large body of research literature suggests certain polysaccharides affect immune system function. One meta-analysis (Ramberg et al 2010) found 62 publications reporting statistically significant effects from taking beta-glucans.

Beta-glucans are more known for their ability to stimulate the immune system and are increasingly popular to combat infections. However, beta-glucans may also have an important part to play as an adjunct to standard hay fever and allergy treatments, because less histamine equates with less inflammation.

Other nutritional sources of allergy relief include pycnogenol (an extract from French maritime pine bark), quercitin (from onions) and vitamin C. These have anti-inflammatory properties and can inhibit the release of histamine.

Free radicals have the ability to release histamine from mast cells, and pycnogenol has a potent ability to scavenge free radicals. It has also been investigated for its ability to inhibit histamine release (Sharma et al 2003).

Increasing the intake of omega-3 fatty acids can also help to reduce the production of inflammatory prostaglandins, via increased dietary intake of oily fish, flax-seed/oils and fish oil supplements.

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