

**On Nutrition: by Helayne Waldman, Ed.D., N.E.**

# Spring is Here.... And so are the Sniffles

Living in the fast lane in the land of colas, fries, donuts and hormone-ridden meat is hard enough on our bodies. But when spring shows up with its showy flush of beautiful buds and blooms, many of us must also cope with not-so-beautiful reactions to pollens, fresh grasses, ragweed and a host of other allergens that descend upon us each year as we ring in the new season.

If you're among the 40 million Americans for whom a walk in the park is no walk in the park, it means that your immune system is going hyper vigilant on you. Here's how. Normally, if it spots an offender, your body puts out armies of antibodies, t-cells, b-cells, and phagocytes among other helpers, who rush to your aid, engulf the invader, destroy it and make history of the whole ugly episode. This process happens so efficiently most of the time that we go about our days blissfully unaware of this continuous struggle for our own personal "homeland security." But while our internal militia literally works itself to the bone day in and day out, there are those days – let's call them those days of pine and roses - when you wish it would help out just a little bit less. The way you might feel after a sleepless night when your three year old insists on making breakfast.

On those days, when your immune system exhibits a touch too much exuberance, your body secretes an antibody known as IgE and then proceeds to pump out histamines--chemicals that cause sneezing, itchy, watery eyes and nose and



other symptoms – all in an attempt to flush out the invaders.

Those who suffer from food allergies know that avoiding offending foods can be a continual challenge. Yet avoiding provocative foods is a relatively trivial task in comparison to avoiding offensive air. Nutritionally speaking, however, there are steps you can take to help tame your macho immune system, perhaps even eliminating or minimizing your need for over the counter pharmaceutical remedies.

Rosemary, the common garden herb, the subject of much attention in recent years, is considered such a champion in the seasonal allergy arena, that its active component, rosmarinic acid, is now extracted and bottled as a food supplement. This powerful plant polyphenol not only has anti-inflammatory properties, but it appears to prevent the activation of immune responder cells, the very cells that cause swelling and fluid formation. In fact, a study published in the 2004 issue of *Clinical and Experimental Allergy* reported that rosmarinic acid was shown to be an effective treatment for allergic asthma. And if you don't enjoy the prickly leaves of fresh rosemary, you can get the same benefits from eating fresh oregano, lemon balm,

sage and marjoram. Keep in mind, however, that foods encourage a gradual corrective effect, as opposed to a suppressive one. So don't expect that their precious compounds will stifle your snuffle in just a few hours; you'll need to stay with it and make these healing foods a regular part of your diet.

## Learning from Chinese Medicine

In the area of allergy relief, Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) teaches us the virtues of an extract of the perilla seed. And for good reason. It turns out that this relative of the cinnamon family is practically bursting with rosmarinic acid. What's more, the plant makes a lovely, lavender perennial that can be grown in most any temperate climate. But if herb gardening is not your thing, you can purchase some perilla seed or the seed oil at your local health food store.

From TCM, we also learn of a formula called "Xin Qin Ke Li." This traditional blend of Chinese herbs including Astragalus, Chinese skullcap and others supports "Wei ch'i", said to be the body's protective shield, and is used regularly in China to treat allergic rhinitis, sinusitis, and other nose and sinus ailments.

Vitamin C and its cousins, the flavanoids, have long been shown to exhibit anti-allergic, anti-inflammatory, antiviral and antioxidant activity. How much do you need? Most nutritionally oriented practitioners will tell you that your bowel will let you know when you've fed it too much Vitamin C! Keep in mind that vitamin C tablets are often

packaged with fillers, binders, coatings and excipients. If you're a truly sensitive soul fighting seasonal allergies, you may want to be careful about introducing any new, potential allergens into the mix. So consider a buffered Vitamin C powder instead.

### **Bring on the herbs, spices and sauerkraut**

Recent research gives us additional, intriguing findings. Those fabulous flora found in yogurt and fermented foods may even play a role in alleviating allergic inflammation and calming the hyperactive immune response.

Turmeric and ginger, considered master healers in the Indian Ayurvedic tradition, have also been shown to inhibit inflammatory compounds involved in allergic reactions. And Omega 3 fatty acids, found in flax seeds, walnuts and fatty fish like salmon and halibut, appear to be superstars in balancing the body in every respect, including the regulation of immune response involved in allergic reactions.

As always, the safest course of action is to consult with a trusted health care practitioner before going on any type of supplement regimen. But there's no reason

you can't immediately get busy stocking your pantry with the fresh herbs and spices nature formulated to help us get through these sniffly times. And there's no time like the present to spring into action!

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