Allergies

This has been the worst spring and early summer for allergies in recent memory.

Nasal allergies can interfere with sleep, cause bacterial sinus infections, and make people shun you as if you had the flu.

The AAAAI, The American Academy of Allergy, Asthma & Immunology has a number of recommendations, and here’s how I summarize (and, for the sticklers out there, oversimplify) the relevant ones for patients (and friends and family) with allergies.

The AAAAI recommends a three-step approach to nasal allergies. If the first one isn’t enough, you keep on doing it and add the second, and if the second isn’t enough, you keep on with the first two and add the third.

The first is to take one of the over-the-counter 24-hour “nonsedating” antihistamines. There are three of them.

Zyrtec and the generics (cetirizine) are not supposed to make you sleepy and make everyone sleepy.

Claritin/Alavert and the generics (loratadine) are not supposed to make you sleepy and make many but not all people sleepy. (They certainly make me sleepy.)

Then there is Allegra and the generics (fexofenadine) which are not supposed to make you sleepy and even if you OD on it won’t make you sleepy.

I investigated this in detail as we were working on the drug list for the new state tactical paramedic program. Some had put in Zyrtec but after my investigation we changed it to Allegra. We didn’t want sleepy snipers.

I also tell people not to use the “-D” versions which includes a decongestant, as the decongestants don’t work very well and have lots of side effects. And the prescription variants have no advantages unless you are an officer or shareholder of the manufacturer.

If that isn’t enough, you add a steroid nasal spray. They used to be prescription-only, but a couple of years ago they all became available over-the-counter, under the tradenames Nasacort (triamcinolone), Flonase (fluticasone) and Rhinocort (budesonide), all of which work similarly well, as well as generics. Get whichever is cheapest. If you are pregnant, Rhinocort is probably the safest; budesonide is quickly taken out of the circulation by the liver so less will get to the baby.

If even that isn’t enough, you add a first-generation antihistamine nasal spray called azelastine, which requires a prescription. If your nose is very congested, spray the azelastine up your nose, then lay flat on your bed with your head hanging over the edge of the bed, so that by gravity, the spray will get through those swollen membranes up to where the sinus orifices are. Stay that way for 30 second, then go do something else for 10 minutes and use the steroid spray the same way; the steroid spray takes about 4 hours to work so it’s best to use the azelastine to open up your nose so the steroid spray can get in deeper.