

Driving While on Allergy Medication ‘Snot a Good Idea

By Reg P. Wydeven
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Last week I wrote about Memorial Day marking the beginning of summer. It also means frozen treats from The Dairy Cove in Cecil. Unfortunately, it means the height of hay fever, too.

My whole family suffers from hay fever, or seasonal allergies. We can't wait to get outside to enjoy the beautiful weather, but we're immediately bombarded by pollen, grass, ragweed and mold. In response, our bodies produce a chemical called histamines, which cause our noses to become stuffy or runny or both and our eyes to be watery, red and itchy.

To battle these histamines, every day we take allergy medicines that contain, surprisingly, antihistamines. I take Zyrtec while the rest of my crew takes Claritin. But the Food and Drug Administration has recently released a statement reminding us that while antihistamines can help with allergy symptoms, they can cause drowsiness and dulled senses. According to Dr. Jane Filie, a medical officer at the FDA's Division of Nonprescription Regulation Development, "Any of these reactions can negatively interfere with driving or operating heavy machinery."

The FDA is the federal agency Congress tasks with protecting the public health by assuring the safety, efficacy and security of prescription and non-prescription drugs.

Even if taking allergy medication doesn't make you feel drowsy, Dr. Filie explained that you can still experience slower reaction time, haziness, or mild confusion. I do okay with my Zyrtec, but if my allergies are really killing me, then I take Tylenol Severe Allergy. I definitely stay away from heavy machinery after taking that. Tylenol Severe Allergy has the same effect on me as Nyquil has on comedian John Panette: he calls the cold remedy the "nighttime, sniffing, sneezing, coughing, aching, how-the-heck-did-I-wake-up-on-my-kitchen-floor medicine."

The FDA also warns about switching allergy medicine for this very reason. FDA pharmacist Ayana Rowley advises that, "If one specific antihistamine worked for you before, take note of the dosage and make sure you get the same medication the next time." This is because different antihistamines may be dosed differently. Like me, you need to be careful if you switch from one medication to another.

I'm lucky that Zyrtec usually works pretty well for me. I'm also fortunate to know that if it's not working, Tylenol Severe Allergy will do the trick, but then I'm going to be sleepy. The FDA cautions, however, that if you're having a bad allergy day, don't simply take higher doses of antihistamines.

"If the correct dosage isn't providing you the relief you expect, don't simply keep taking more and more of that product," Rowley explained, "but instead, consult your health care professional."

Finally, the FDA wanted to alert consumers to avoid combining antihistamines with alcohol, sleeping pills or tranquilizers. According to Dr. Filie, this can lead to greater drowsiness and greater danger.

So if you're taking antihistamines and will be driving, be careful. After all, drowsiness behind the wheel is nothing to sneeze at.

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