

But now B-12 is poised for a different role: the non-strings-attached breakthrough allergy treatment we've long been waiting for. In a Phase III drug trial last fall, a group of seasonal allergy sufferers spent up to six weeks taking massive amounts of B-12 — 2,500 times the recommended daily allowance — in the form of lozenges dissolved under their tongues twice daily. The results were impressive, to say the least. The most typical symptoms

— sneezing, congestion, and itchy, runny nose — were half as severe in the B-12 takers as in the placebo group. Dr. Lyndon Mansfield, a Texas allergist who helped plan the study, says, "The effects were comparable to those that got Claritin approved. But the dramatic thing about B-12 is that it's so darn safe."

The tired, parched, spacey feeling so common with antihistamine allergy meds? Nada. And as Mansfield points out, it's practically impossible to OD on the stuff. Perhaps most surprising, though, is the longevity of B-12's effects. Previous studies suggest that the allergy-suppressing benefits still

run strong for months after the B-12 treatments. Even almighty Claritin doesn't last more than a day or two.

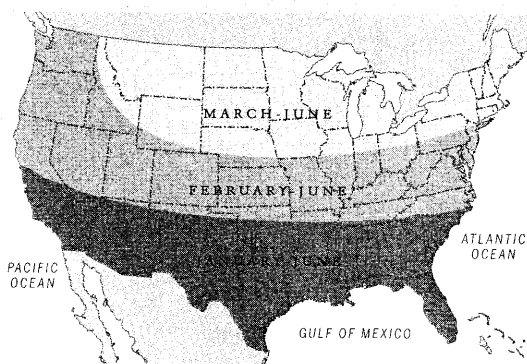
The secret to B-12's allergy-fighting success appears to lie in the vitamin's ability to retune the immune system. Allergies, after all, are immune malfunctions, and increasingly widespread ones at that. They are now twice as common as they were a generation ago, afflicting more

than 50 million Americans. Explanations for this surge vary, but one of the problems seems to be connected to the very nature of modern life: Our immune systems don't get the kind of practice fighting off irritants that they got in the days before air filters and antibacterial soap. As a result, a certain type of immune cell, known as an IgE antibody, stays on a constant hair trigger, ready to call out the body's histamine — the ultimate source of all that allergy misery — every time it bumps into a pollen grain.

A company named Cobalis, which funded the Phase III trial, owns a patent on B-12 as an allergy therapy and is seeking FDA approval to start selling lozenges as an over-the-counter allergy medicine. If the company clears the remaining red tape, its product will be on pharmacy shelves by next spring, under the brand name PreHistin. In the meantime, intrepid (or desperate) sniffers can try to replicate the study with their own B-12 fix. Three weeks before the spring pollen starts flying in your area, take six mg of B-12 each day in the

form of sublingual lozenges. (The lozenges, available from a variety of leading vitamin brands in one and five mg forms, are a lot easier to track down — and more comfortable — than the shots.) Continue the B-12 regimen for a total of six weeks. And if you happen to play a bit more like Tejada when you take the softball diamond this spring, just write it off as a lucky side effect.

Springtime Allergy Zones



Trees are to blame for springtime allergies: oaks from Missouri to Maine, pecans in the South, cottonwoods in the Great Plains, alders in the Pacific Northwest, and countless other leafy culprits across the country. The season when the pollen attack hits your area depends largely on latitude; in the southern parts of the country the allergy-prone start suffering not long after New Year's. Thanks to recent research into vitamin B-12 as an allergy treatment, though, this seasonal misery may soon be rendered extinct.

Top Shelf

Aren't ready to try B-12? Despite the blizzard of brand names out there, your choices come down to a handful of simple options: the newer, less-drowsy-formula antihistamines; nasal steroid sprays; the leukotriene-blocker Singulair; and old-school allergy shots, which involve getting injected by a doctor with tiny amounts of allergens. Here's a rundown of some major players, plus another promising treatment on the horizon:



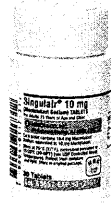
CLARITIN OTC

Second-generation antihistamines like Claritin are the first line of defense; they can be used alone or with nasal sprays. Side effects can include drowsiness and dry mouth.



FLONASE NASAL

Corticosteroids like Flonase take several hours to work but they're stronger than antihistamines. Side effects can include nosebleeds, and the sprays can damage the septum if used incorrectly.



SINGULAIR

This pill blocks the chemical leukotriene, which contributes to allergy symptoms. It can be weak alone but works well with steroids or antihistamines. Side effects can include headache and sore throat.



XOLAIR

This new allergic asthma drug, available only by injection, might soon be used to treat allergies — which has some doctors excited, as it targets IgE to stop allergic reactions before they start.

Health Notes

HEART HEALTH

An Easy Artery Test

Until now, only expensive carotid ultrasound or coronary calcium tests could detect hardening of the arteries, a deadly precursor to a heart attack. But the new PreVu Skin Sterol Test — a cheap, noninvasive litmus test involving a dye that changes colors in the presence of skin cholesterol — aims to change all that. Skin cholesterol levels correlate to the thickness of your arteries, so the PreVu test is ideal for spotting vascular problems during your regular checkup. The test is being introduced in the U.S. as you read this (premdinc.com).

BEAT CANCER

Cutting Cancer Risk

Unlike, say, heart disease, cancer can seem remarkably random. But according to a huge survey of global cancer data published recently in the *Lancet*, 35 percent of the world's seven million cancer deaths in 2001 were attributable to nine risk factors definitely under your control. The ones that apply to American men, in order of number of deaths caused:

- **Smoking**
If you haven't quit yet, go to quitnet.com.
- **Alcohol use**
If you're not a drinker, no reason to start.
- **Excess weight**
A BMI of 21 (146 pounds at 5' 10") is ideal.
- **Low fruit and vegetable intake**
Shoot for at least nine servings a day.
- **Physical inactivity**
Get at least 2.5 hours of exercise per week.
- **Urban air pollution**
Daily data is available at airnow.gov.

MENTAL EDGE

A Truly Smart Drug

Most of the time it's wise to be skeptical of overhyped herbal supplements with names like Brain Speed. Yet Brain Speed's active ingredient, huperzine-A, is showing promise in clinical trials for the treatment of Alzheimer's, and studies suggest that huperzine-A may also boost alertness and learning performance in healthy people — which means the unfortunately named supplement may be one to try after all.

MAP: ALAN KIKUCHI; ALL MEDICINES EXCEPT XOLAIR: MICHAEL PIROCCO