



# Kansas RTAP Fact Sheet

A Service of The University of Kansas Transportation Center for Rural Transit Providers

## Driving Under the Influence... of Antihistamines

by Justin Dorsey

The dangers of driving under the influence of alcohol are well known. However, do you know the dangers of driving under the influence of antihistamines? If not, this article's discussion will help you learn how antihistamines work, how they affect driving, and how to reduce their side effects.

### How do antihistamines work?

When someone has an allergic reaction, cells in the body release the chemical histamine. Histamine attaches to cells and irritates them. This irritation causes the runny nose, watery

eyes, sneezing, itching, and other allergic reactions we know and hate. Although histamine seems like an unwanted nuisance, it performs an important brain function; it helps keep us alert and attentive.

To reduce allergy suffering, antihistamines were developed to stop histamine from attaching to cells. Original antihistamines were very good at this. Maybe too good. They blocked histamine from attaching to cells in our respiratory system—and brain. The result: allergy suffering was reduced, but alertness was too.



Side effects from antihistamines can be debilitating—and include drowsiness, impaired thinking and reduced reaction time.

by (first-generation) Benadryl was similar to impairment caused by significant amounts of alcohol. Further, the Iowa study found that drivers taking Benadryl could not accurately judge its effect on their driving.

Newer, second-generation antihistamines, often called “non-sedating” antihistamines, have drastically reduced side effects. In fact, some have no side effects. The downside is that they are generally more expensive.

### • Popular First-Generation Antihistamines

*These typically have stronger side effects*

- Alka-Seltzer Plus Night-Time Cold Medicine
- Benadryl Allergy
- Dimetapp Cold & Allergy Elixir
- Dramamine Original
- Robitussin Allergy & Cough Liquid
- Tavist
- Vicks NyQuil

### • Popular Second-Generation Antihistamines

*Side effects are typically milder*

- Allegra
- Alavert
- Claritin
- Semprex
- Zyrtec

### Effects on driving

Antihistamines can be divided into two groups: first-generation and second-generation. First-generation have significant side effects that reduce an individual's ability to safely operate a vehicle. These side effects include: drowsiness, impaired thinking, and reduced reaction time. Effects can be quite dramatic. For example, separate studies from the University of Iowa and Minnesota found that driver impairment caused

## **How to reduce antihistamine side effects**

Because cold season is here, many drivers will be taking antihistamines. What can be done to reduce their effects on driving? First, do not take antihistamines with alcohol. Second, ask a medical professional when to take them so that their possible drowsiness effect has worn off or is minimal by the time you drive. Finally, if taking them while on another medication, check with a medical professional about unexpected drug interaction effects.

According to Lieutenant John Eickhorn of the Kansas Highway Patrol, people tend to associate drug-related driving impairment with illegal drugs only. This is not the whole story. Although illegal drugs like marijuana and cocaine impair driving, so do legal drugs like antihistamines. Further, he suggests that, if taking a drug for the first time, avoid driving until you are familiar with its side effects.

Transit drivers rely heavily on alertness and reaction time to operate their vehicle. When a driver takes antihistamines, those skills may become diminished. Therefore, if you are a driver taking antihistamines, be extra careful, ask your medical professional if taking a second-generation instead of first-generation antihistamine is possible, and report your medications to your supervisor to determine your fitness to drive.

### **Sources:**

American Academy of Allergy, Asthma, and Immunology information on Claritin and second-generation antihistamines.

[http://www.aaaai.org/patients/resources/patient\\_qa\\_otc\\_claritin.stm](http://www.aaaai.org/patients/resources/patient_qa_otc_claritin.stm)

Nurses Notebook information on antihistamine research.

[http://www.nursesnotebook.com/antihistamine\\_dangers.htm](http://www.nursesnotebook.com/antihistamine_dangers.htm)

Asthma & Allergy Information (on how antihistamines work).

<http://www.users.globalnet.co.uk/~aair/antihistamines.htm#WHATRANTI>

HealthLink Medical College of Wisconsin information on antihistamines and driving performance.

<http://healthlink.mcw.edu/article/968785675.html>

American Academy of Family Physicians information on first and second-generation antihistamines.  
<http://familydoctor.org/857.xml>.

Reprinted from the April 2006 issue of the *Kansas TransReporter*, a publication of the Kansas Rural Transit Assistance Program (RTAP) at the Kansas University Transportation Center.