



GOOD HEALTH

By **PAT HAGAN**

A PILL made from the bark of a pine tree could help hayfever sufferers cope with the annual misery of runny noses and itchy eyes. The pill appears to block the release of histamine in the body.

Histamine is a chemical pumped out in large volumes by the immune system when it suspects it is under attack. But when the body's defences come into contact with allergens such as pollen, they can produce too much histamine, triggering the symptoms of hayfever.

The pine bark pill, called pycnogenol, is believed to have a powerful antioxidant effect that halts the rush of histamine and prevents symptoms developing.

Cilla Kyrianos from High Barnet, Hertfordshire, has been taking the pine bark pill since January after 20 years of suffering with hayfever problems. Doctors had diagnosed allergic rhinitis — a hayfever-like condition that can affect people all year round.

'Within a week of taking the new pill, my itchy eyes had cleared up. I was also breathing more easily and sleeping better,' she says.

In the UK, around 13 million people suffer from hayfever symptoms, enduring an annual misery that ranges from mild symptoms, such as a runny nose and itchy eyes, to more severe complications, such as asthma attacks.

One in four hayfever sufferers is thought to be sensitive to birch pollen, which contaminates the air in early spring. The birch pollen season usually lasts around a month, giving way to the problem of grass pollen allergies from May and June onwards.

Most people with hayfever rely on over-the-counter medicines such as eye drops and antihistamines to relieve symptoms. Prescription-only steroid nasal sprays also help. Severe cases can be treated with immunotherapy, where doctors inject tiny amounts of pollen to help build up immunity.

BUT antihistamine pills do not work for all patients and the long-term use of steroid sprays is not recommended because of potential side effects. As a result, many sufferers end up searching for more natural hayfever cures.

Pycnogenol, which costs £12.25 for 30 tablets, is made from the bark of the French maritime pine tree, found in the south-west of the country. Recent scientific studies have confirmed anecdotal evidence that it can help a range of medical conditions.

Tests have already shown pycnogenol is effective in treating pre-menstrual syndrome, deep vein thrombosis and even asthma. One study shows it lowers glucose levels in patients with diabetes.

Its secret is thought to be its

powerful antioxidant properties, which give it the power to combat free radicals — the oxygen-rich cells in the body that can destroy other cells in much the same way as rust rots a car.

One theory is that by blocking the effects of free radicals, pine bark also blocks the release of histamine.

Bristol GP Dr Donald Grant, who has an interest in natural hayfever cures, said pine bark could be working by mopping up free radicals, thereby preventing the inflammation and irritation.

'Free radicals can trigger this inflammatory reaction, so the pill may work by mopping them up and halting the release of histamine.'

Cilla Kyrianos, 45, first suffered problems in her mid-20s. As well as affecting her eyes and nose, hayfever also triggered throbbing sinus pain and disrupted her sleep. Cilla was diagnosed with

allergic rhinitis. She attended a specialist allergy clinic and consulted a homoeopath and an expert in Chinese medicine — but found little relief.

Her nose was so badly blocked that doctors even suspected she had developed nasal polyps — growths that can partially block the airways.

In January this year, Cilla saw an advertisement for a clinical trial involving pycnogenol, and signed up.

'I was told to take one 100mg pill a day for 40 days, but within just a week, I noticed a difference. My eyes stopped itching and I could breathe more clearly.'

'After the 40 days, I went back to my GP. He examined my nose and confirmed the inflammation had gone down.'

'He gave me another prescription, and since then my symptoms have continued to improve.'

■ Pycnogenol distributors, tel: 0800 591 756.

After 20 years I've cured my hayfever — thanks to pine bark



No more sneezing: Cilla Kyrianos

Picture: BEN LISTER