

## OTC Medications

Over-the-counter (OTC) medications are medications the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) considers safe and effective for use without a prescription that you can buy at pharmacies, supermarkets, discount retailers, or Prescription Solutions® Mail Service Pharmacy. One advantage of OTC medications is that you can treat minor illnesses without visiting your health care provider. However, it is important to read and understand the OTC product label before you take any OTC medication. If your symptoms do not improve after a day or two of self-treatment, you should contact your health care provider.

### What Medications Are Available Without A Prescription?

Below is a brief list of common OTC medications and their uses. These medications can be purchased by their brand name, but a retail store will often have their own brand or generic product available at a lower cost.

#### Common OTC Medications and Their Uses

Brand Name <sup>†</sup>	Generic Name	Common Use
<b>Allergy Medications</b>		
Claritin®	Loratadine	Relief of seasonal allergies
Zyrtec®	Cetirizine	
<b>Antibacterial Medications</b>		
Neosporin®	neomycin/bacitracin/ polymyxin B	Prevent or treat infections in minor cuts, scrapes, or burns
<b>Antifungal Medications</b>		
Desenex®	Clotrimazole	Treatment of minor fungal infections (eg, ring worm, athlete's foot, jock itch)
Lotrimin® AF	Clotrimazole	
Lamisil® AT	Terbinafine	
<b>Cough And Cold Medications</b>		
Theraflu®	acetaminophen/ pheniramine/phenylephrine	Relief of cold
Robitussin® DM	guaifenesin/ dextromethorphan	Relief of dry coughs
<b>Decongestants*</b>		
Sudafed®	Pseudoephedrine	Relief of stuffy nose

## Common OTC Medications and Their Uses (continued)

Brand Name <sup>†</sup>	Generic Name	Common Use
<b>Indigestion Or Heartburn Medications</b>		
Antacids (various)	Various	Relief of indigestion or symptoms of heartburn
Pepcid <sup>®</sup> AC	Famotidine	
Prilosec <sup>®</sup> OTC	Omeprazole	
Zantac <sup>®</sup>	Ranitidine	
<b>Pain Relievers</b>		
Tylenol <sup>®</sup>	Acetaminophen	Relief of headaches, minor aches and pains, fever
Advil <sup>®</sup>	Ibuprofen	
Motrin <sup>®</sup>	Ibuprofen	
Aleve <sup>®</sup>	Naproxen	

<sup>†</sup> Brand name products come in many different formulations. Not all products under the same brand name contain the same active ingredients.

\* Some OTC decongestants are only available behind the pharmacy counter.

## Which OTC Medication Is Most Effective For Pain Relief?

The choice of pain reliever will depend on the type of pain you are experiencing. The most common OTC pain relievers include acetaminophen and nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs), like aspirin, ibuprofen, and naproxen. Acetaminophen works well for fever and minor joint or muscle aches but does not reduce swelling. Aspirin and ibuprofen are generally used for the relief of fever, swollen joints and muscles, and arthritis. Ibuprofen and naproxen are also useful for headache relief. It is important to inform your health care provider if you are taking these medications, as they may cause stomach or liver problems.

## I Heard That Aspirin Can Prevent Heart Attacks And Strokes. Do Other OTC Pain Relievers Do This Also?

No. Aspirin is the only OTC medication shown to prevent heart attacks and strokes. However, aspirin is not appropriate for everyone. If you have no sign or if you're not at risk of a heart or blood vessel disease, the risk of taking a small dose of aspirin may outweigh the benefits. Serious side effects of aspirin include bleeding in the stomach, brain or kidney failure, and certain types of strokes. Talk with your health care provider before starting aspirin.<sup>1</sup>

## Which OTC Medications Are Best For Treating An Allergy, A Cough, Or A Cold?

People may respond differently to the same medication, and symptoms can differ from person to person. What works well for you may not work for someone else.

Most OTC allergy medications contain an antihistamine. These antihistamines can work as well as prescription antihistamines at preventing common allergy symptoms (eg, itching, runny nose, or sneezing).<sup>2</sup> However, most OTC antihistamines cause sleepiness, grogginess, and decreased alertness. This includes Zyrtec, which contains the active ingredient cetirizine. Claritin (also known as loratadine) is the only available OTC antihistamine that does not cause drowsiness in most people compared to other

antihistamines. Because these medications may cause drowsiness or dizziness, it is important to not drive, use machinery, or do anything that requires you to be alert until you know how the medication affects you. It is also important to not stand or sit up quickly after long periods of sitting or lying down to reduce the risk of dizzy or fainting spells.

Many OTC cough and cold medications also contain an antihistamine. However, cough and cold medications often contain additional medications to control fever, cough, congestion, and general aches. It is important to read the OTC product label carefully and ask your health care provider or pharmacist which product will work best for your specific symptoms. For severe or persistent symptoms, you may need a prescription strength medication.

## How Do Heartburn Medications Work?

Indigestion or heartburn medications work by neutralizing stomach acids or decreasing the amount of acid in the stomach. The two most common types are antacids and stomach acid blockers. Antacids are available in tablet or liquid forms and are best if you need quick relief. They act quickly to neutralize stomach acids, but their effects do not last as long as other options. Some common examples include Alka-Seltzer®, Gaviscon®, and Tums®.

OTC stomach acid blockers decrease the amount of acid in the stomach and contain the same ingredients as prescription acid blockers. For simple heartburn, these medications offer a low-cost option to prescription medications. While they will not work as fast as antacids, one dose usually provides stomach acid relief for several hours. Common examples include Pepcid AC, Zantac, and Prilosec OTC. Antacids and stomach acid blockers should not be used for long periods of time without consulting your health care provider since they can mask the symptoms of a worsening stomach condition.

## What OTC Creams Are Available For the Treatment of Skin Rash And Fungus?

You can treat minor skin rashes with a hydrocortisone cream or lotion. Benadryl® cream is useful for localized itching due to insect bites or minor skin irritation.

Minor fungal infections can usually be treated with OTC antifungal creams, such as Desenex or Lotrimin AF. Common conditions associated with a fungal infection include jock itch, athlete's foot, and ringworm. However, severe or persistent conditions require an evaluation and treatment by your health care provider.

## What Information Is On An OTC Medication Label?

- **Active ingredient/Purpose:** This section tells you the generic name of the drug, what it does and how much is in each pill or teaspoon (1 teaspoon equals 5 mL).
- **Uses:** This section tells you what condition(s) the medication is approved to treat.
- **Warnings:** This section tells you who should avoid the medication and lists known potential side effects.
- **Directions:** This section tells you how much and how often you can or should take the medication.
- **Other information:** This section tells you how to store your medication when you are not using it.
- **Inactive ingredients:** This section tells you what other ingredients are used along with the active ingredient to make the product (eg, added flavor, color, etc.).

## What Do I Need To Remember?

1. OTC medications can be convenient and low-cost options to prescription medications for certain short-term medical conditions or for long-term if instructed by your health care provider.
2. More does not necessarily mean better when it comes to medications. You should never take OTC medications in higher doses or for a longer period of time than the label recommends.<sup>3</sup>
3. Medications from the same brand family do not necessarily treat the same conditions or contain the same ingredients. Medication labels also change as new information becomes available. It is important to read the label and follow the instructions each time you purchase an OTC medication.<sup>3</sup>
4. OTC medications can interact with other medications, foods, and beverages as well as health conditions such as diabetes, kidney disease, and high blood pressure. Check with your health care provider or pharmacist before choosing an OTC medication.<sup>3</sup>
5. Always talk to your health care provider before taking any medication if you're pregnant or breast-feeding.
6. If your symptoms don't improve after one or two days of self-treatment, call your health care provider.
7. Even though OTC medications are generally thought to be safe, these medications are not for everyone. Always check with your health care provider or pharmacist before taking any OTC medications.

### References:

1. Aspirin for reducing your risk of heart attack and stroke: know the facts. Center for Drug Evaluation and Research Web site. [http://www.fda.gov/cder/consumerinfo/dailyaspirin\\_brochure.htm](http://www.fda.gov/cder/consumerinfo/dailyaspirin_brochure.htm). Updated August 17, 2005. Accessed April 28, 2009.
2. OTC medicines and how they work. American Academy of Family Physicians Web site. <http://familydoctor.org/online/famdocen/home/otc-center/basics/otc.html>. Updated March 2008. Accessed April 28, 2009.
3. Over-the-counter medicines: what's right for you? US Food and Drug Administration Web site. <http://www.fda.gov/cder/consumerinfo/WhatsRightForYou.htm>. Published March 7, 2006. Accessed April 28, 2009.

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