



Medicines to Treat Allergies

Many people get allergies when they come in contact with certain things. For example, when some people have contact with dust, animal dander, or pollen from plants, their eyes may get itchy and watery. They may also feel congested, have a runny nose, or sneeze a lot. When a person has these kinds of allergic reactions they have **hay fever**.

There is another type of allergic reaction you can get that can affect the skin. You may see red bumps or patches all over the body and they can be very itchy. This type of allergic reaction is called **hives**. You can get hives by eating certain foods, taking certain medicines, or feeling very stressed.

If you suffer from hay fever, hives, or other minor allergic reactions, then this factsheet will help you learn about the medicines that you can take to get some relief from these allergy symptoms.



How do I know if I have allergies or something else?

Sometimes people are not sure if they have allergies or something else, like a cold or the flu. The information below can help you decide if your symptoms are probably a sign of allergies or a sign of a cold or the flu.

Symptoms of allergies



- ✓ Congestion or runny nose
- ✓ Cough
- ✓ Headache
- ✓ Itchy nose and throat
- ✓ Itchy, red, large patches or bumps on the body (hives)
- ✓ Itchy, red, scaling patches on the face, elbows, or knees (eczema)
- ✓ Pain in the face
- ✓ Sneezing
- ✓ Teary eyes

Symptoms of a cold or the flu

- ✓ Cough with chest congestion
- ✓ Fever
- ✓ Muscle aches or feeling achy all over
- ✓ Runny nose with colored, thick mucus
- ✓ Sore throat



You could have a more serious condition if you have the following symptoms:

- Itchy, red rash that you see in the groin, underarms, feet, or under the breasts
- Painful, red blisters that you see soon after touching something

- Patches of skin that are silver in color, scaly, and sometimes itch

These symptoms are **not** a sign of allergies, so make sure you visit your doctor to get the right treatment.



How can I tell the difference between allergies and asthma?

Most people that have asthma also have allergies but you can tell the difference by the symptoms. If you feel any of the following symptoms then you may have asthma, not just allergies:

- You feel out of breath
- Your chest is tight
- You wheeze and cough

If you find it very difficult to breathe or talk, your heart beats really fast, or if you feel that the skin around the ribs or neck is pulled tightly, then you may be having a very strong asthma attack. Call 911 to get help right away.

Medicines used to treat allergies will not help relieve asthma symptoms. If you think you have asthma, you should see a doctor right away to get a diagnosis and the right treatment.



What can I do to treat my allergies?

The best way to prevent allergy symptoms is to stay away from those things that cause the allergy but this is not always possible. That is why most people with allergies need to take medicines.

The medicines that doctors use to treat the symptoms of allergies are called **antihistamines**. Some examples of brand-name antihistamines are *Zyrtec* and *Claritin*. You can buy antihistamines with or without a prescription. They are available in brand-name and in generic form.



In the United States, “generic” medicines are just as good as brand-name medicines. They are very safe and work just like the brand-name medicine, and they cost a lot less money. Ask your doctor if you can get a generic medicine instead of a brand-name medicine.



Do antihistamines have side effects?

Yes, they do have side effects. You may:

- Feel sleepy or distracted
- Feel that your mouth, nose, or throat are dry
- Get a headache
- Feel dizzy
- Feel nausea
- Lose your voice (hoarseness)

Sometimes antihistamines may cause more serious side effects. For example:

- You may feel weak and nervous
- Your heart may beat very fast
- Your skin may turn yellowish
- You may have problems with your vision
- You may find it difficult to urinate
- You may get a stomachache

If you have any of these serious side effects, you should talk to your doctor.



Which antihistamine should I use?

Consumer Reports Best Buy Drugs evaluated seven of the newest antihistamines by comparing how well they work, how safe they are, their side effects, and their cost. *Consumer Reports* recommends the following generic antihistamines as the best for most people:

- **Cetirizine** (tablets)
- **Loratadine** (tablets, dissolving tablets, or liquid)
- **Alavert** (dissolving tablets)

All of these medicines are available without a prescription. If you try an antihistamine and it does not work well for you, you should try another one until you find the right one. If you need to take an antihistamine every day, shop around to find the best price. There can be a big difference in price for these medicines from store to store, even in the generic form.

To learn more about this topic go to:

<http://www.consumerreports.org/health/best-buy-drugs/antihistamine.htm>



How to Get the Best Price for Your Medicines

- **Ask for a generic:** Tell your pharmacist you want a generic medicine instead of the brand-name. You will pay less for a generic. Not all brand-name medicines have a generic, but many do.
- **Compare prices:** Call or visit three different pharmacies. Give them the name of the medicine and ask how much it costs. Ask if they have a drug discount program that can help you pay less for your medicine. Buy your medicine from the pharmacy that gives you the cheapest price.
- **Sign up for patient assistance programs:** Most companies that make medicines have programs that help people that don't have a lot of money and do not have insurance to get brand-name medicines for free or at a low cost. The Partnership for Prescription Assistance can help you find a program: www.pparx.org or 1-888-477-2669.

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