



Second-generation antihistamines are widely used to relieve the symptoms of hay fever (allergic rhinitis), hives (urticaria), and other allergies. Studies have found these drugs to be equally effective and generally safe, but they can be misused.

To help you and your doctor choose the right antihistamine if you need one, *Consumers Reports* has evaluated the seven drugs in this category based on their effectiveness, safety, and cost. This 2-page brief is a summary of a 18-page report you can access on the Internet at ConsumerReportsHealth.org/BestBuyDrugs. You can also learn about other drugs we've analyzed on this *free* Web site.

DO YOU NEED AN ANTIHISTAMINE?

Some people who take allergy medicines do not have allergies, so you should see your doctor for an accurate diagnosis before taking antihistamines on a regular basis. Diagnosis and treatment is important because people with allergies are at much higher risk of developing asthma and sinus infections (sinusitis). And the inflammation that accompanies (and to some degree fosters) the allergic response can damage the respiratory system and make you more susceptible to lung infections like pneumonia.

The newer antihistamines cause less drowsiness than the older antihistamines, which include nonprescription drugs such as Benadryl Allergy, Chlor-Trimeton Allergy, and Dimetapp Allergy. But the newer drugs are no more effective than the older ones at relieving symptoms, and they can still cause drowsiness, especially at higher doses.

Our independent evaluations are based on scientific reviews conducted by the Oregon Health and Science University-based Drug Effectiveness Review Project. These materials were made possible by a grant from the state Attorney General Consumer and Prescriber Education Grant Program, which is funded by the multi-state settlement of consumer fraud claims regarding the marketing of the prescription drug Neurontin (gabapentin).

Our Recommendations

Antihistamines are effective and generally safe. They ease the symptoms of hay fever, hives and other allergies in most people, though they don't usually relieve symptoms entirely. The cost for the newer medicines varies from about \$13 to more than \$300 a month, so price might be an important factor in your choice. Taking dosing convenience, cost, and effectiveness and safety into account, we have selected the following as *Consumer Reports Health Best Buy Drugs*:

- Loratadine 10 mg tablets
- Loratadine dissolving 10 mg tablets
- Loratadine syrup 10 mg
- Alavert (loratadine) dissolving 10 mg tablets

All of these are low-cost generics available without a prescription in pharmacies and other stores that sell medications. All contain loratadine, the active ingredient in the nonprescription drug Claritin (a best-selling prescription drug until 2002 when it became available without a prescription). Some people may respond well to one antihistamine while getting no benefit from another, so if loratadine does not work for you, then try cetirizine or one of the other antihistamines.

This information was published in September 2010.

Summary of Evidence on Antihistamines

Generic Name (Brand names)	Usual Adult Dose	Proven Effective Against Hay Fever and Seasonal Allergies?	Proven Effective Against Chronic or Perennial Allergies?	Proven Effective Against Hives? (Urticaria)
Azelastine nasal spray/pump (Astelin, Astepro)	One or two sprays per nostril twice daily	Yes	Yes	NA ²
Cetirizine (Zyrtec)	10 mg once daily	Yes	Yes	Yes
Desloratadine (Claritin)	5 mg once daily	Yes	Yes	Yes
Fexofenadine (Allegra)	60 mg once or twice daily, or 180 mg once daily	Yes	No ¹	Yes
Levocetirizine (Xyzal)	5 mg once daily	Yes	Yes	Yes
Loratadine (Alavert, Claritin)	10 mg once daily	Yes	Yes	Yes
Olopatadine nasal spray (Patanase)	Two sprays per nostril twice daily	Yes	No	NA ²

1. Sufficient evidence was not available for fexofenadine, although it is likely effective in treating perennial allergy symptoms.

2. NA = Not applicable; the nasal sprays are not used for treating hives.

Antihistamines — Price Comparison

Generic Name and Dose	Brand Name ¹	Is Drug a Generic or Branded Generic? ²	Drug is OTC? ³	Usual Adult Dose ⁴	Average Monthly Cost ⁵
Azelastine nasal spray/pump 137 mcg	Azelastine	Yes	No	Two to four sprays, twice daily	\$63 - \$127
Azelastine nasal spray/pump 137 mcg	Astelin	No	No	Two to four sprays, twice daily	\$86 - \$172
Azelastine nasal spray/pump 137 mcg	Astupro	No	No	Two to four sprays, twice daily	\$75 - \$151
Azelastine nasal spray/pump 205.5 mcg	Astupro	No	No	Two to four sprays, twice daily	\$76 - \$153
Cetirizine chewable tablet 10 mg	Zyrtec	No	Yes	One	\$30
Cetirizine tablet 10 mg	Zyrtec	No	Yes	One	\$25
Cetirizine syrup 10 mg/10 ml	Zyrtec	No	Yes	10 mg per day	\$95
Cetirizine tablet 10 mg	Generic	Yes	Yes	One	\$17
Cetirizine syrup 10 mg/10 ml	Generic	Yes	Yes	10 mg per day	\$66
Desloratadine dissolving tablet 2.5 mg	Clarinet RediTabs	No	No	One	\$206
Desloratadine tablet 5 mg	Clarinet	No	No	One	\$169
Desloratadine syrup 2.5 mg/5 ml	Clarinet	No	No	2.5 mg per day	\$103
Fexofenadine tablet 30 mg	Allegra	No	No	Two	\$506
Fexofenadine capsule 60 mg	Allegra	No	No	Two	\$716
Fexofenadine tablet 60 mg	Allegra	No	No	Two	\$117
Fexofenadine tablet 30 mg	Generic	Yes	No	Two	\$53
Fexofenadine tablet 60 mg	Generic	Yes	No	Two	\$86
Fexofenadine dissolving tablet 30 mg	Allegra ODT	No	No	Two	\$155
Fexofenadine liquid 30 mg/5 ml	Allegra	No	No	30 mg twice per day	\$102
Levocetirizine tablet 5 mg	Xyzal	No	No	One	\$141
Levocetirizine syrup 2.5 mg/5 ml	Xyzal	No	No	5 mg per day	\$304
 Loratadine dissolving tablet 10 mg	Alavert	BG	Yes	One	\$14
 Loratadine dissolving tablet 10 mg	Claritin RediTabs	No	Yes	One	\$27
 Loratadine dissolving tablet 10 mg	Generic	Yes	Yes	One	\$18
 Loratadine tablet 10 mg	Claritin	No	Yes	One	\$25
 Loratadine tablet 10 mg	Generic	Yes	Yes	One	\$13
 Loratadine syrup 10 mg/10 ml	Claritin	No	Yes	10 mg per day	\$80
 Loratadine syrup 10 mg/10 ml	Generic	Yes	Yes	10 mg per day	\$56
Olopatadine nasal spray	Patanase	No	No	Four sprays, twice daily	\$142

1. "Generic" indicates the drug is sold as a generic.

2. "Yes" means it is a generic, sold under the chemical or scientific name. "BG" means it is a branded generic, which is a generic copy of an original drug given a special name by its manufacturer. "No" means it is a brand-name drug.

3. OTC stands for over-the-counter. "Yes" means it is a nonprescription OTC drug.

4. Frequency of use reflects on recommendations on the package insert. Some products can be used more or less frequently.

5. For drugs available by prescription only, monthly costs reflect nationwide retail average prices for July 2010, rounded to the nearest dollar. Data is provided by Wolters Kluwer Pharma Solutions, which is not involved in our analysis or recommendations. For loratadine and cetirizine drugs available OTC, monthly costs reflect average prices obtained by Consumer Reports in August 2010 from five national drugstore chains—CVS, Rite Aid, Target, Walgreens, and Walmart—in 19 cities across the U.S.

6. These average retail prices are for August 2009 to July 2010 due to low prescription volume.

NOTE: The information contained in the *Consumer Reports Health Best Buy Drugs*™ reports is for general informational purposes and is not intended to replace consultation with a physician or other health care professional. Consumers Union is not liable for any loss or injury related to your use of the reports. The reports are intended solely for individual, non-commercial use and may not be used in advertising, promotion, or for any other commercial purpose.