



ANTIHISTAMINES ARE WIDELY used medicines to relieve the symptoms of hay fever, hives, and other allergies. Most of the nonprescription versions have been around a long time. But four antihistamines were developed more recently. Three of these are still prescription medicines. One – loratadine – is now available without a prescription.

To help you and your doctor choose the antihistamine medicine that is best and most cost-effective for you, *Consumer Reports* has evaluated the drugs in this category based on their effectiveness, safety, and cost. These two pages are a summary of a 16-page report you can access on the Internet at www.CRBestBuyDrugs.org. You can also learn about other drugs we've analyzed on this free Web site. Our evaluations are based on scientific reviews conducted by the Oregon Health and Science University-based Drug Effectiveness Review Project. Grants from the Engelberg Foundation and National Library of Medicine help fund *Consumer Reports Best Buy Drugs*.

DO YOU NEED AN ANTIHISTAMINE?

If a doctor diagnoses allergies, treating your condition is important. People with allergies are at higher risk of developing asthma and sinus infections. Also, the inflammation that accompanies the allergic response can damage the respiratory system and make you more susceptible to lung infections such as pneumonia. Antihistamines are just one treatment for allergies. You may need others – a steroid nasal spray, for example.

Do You Have Allergies or Something Else?

Probably Allergies

- Sneezing
- Clear nasal discharge
- Teary eyes
- Itchy nose and throat
- Congestion, runny nose

Wheezing, shortness of breath, difficulty breathing, coughing (clear sputum) – when exposed to offending substance or at certain times of the year.

Itchy, red scaly patches, often on the face, elbows or knees (eczema); and/or itchy, red patches on the body (hives)

Probably NOT Allergies

- Sore throat
- Runny nose with mucus discharge
- Fever (slight if a cold; higher if the flu)
- Cough, chest congestion
- Muscle aches, feeling achy all over

Wheezing, shortness of breath, difficulty breathing, fatigue, coughing (clear, colored or bloody sputum) – all the time or periodically.

Painful, red blisters appearing soon after contact with offending substance (e.g. poison oak or ivy). Itchy, red rash in groin, underarms, or on feet (likely fungal).

Our Recommendations

Antihistamines are generally safe and effective medicines. The four newer drugs we evaluated all cause less drowsiness than the older nonprescription antihistamines – such as Benadryl Allergy and Dimetapp Allergy. That's important because drowsiness has been linked to a higher risk of car accidents and on-the-job injuries.

None of the newer drugs is more effective or safer than the others. But their costs vary. Three of the four are still brand-name prescription drugs. These are cetirizine (Zyrtec), desloratadine (Clarinex) and fexofenadine (Allegra). The fourth – loratadine (Claritin, Alavert) – is now available as a less expensive nonprescription drug.

Based on the evidence for effectiveness and safety, as well as dosing convenience and cost, we selected the following versions of loratadine as *Consumer Reports Best Buy Drugs*:

- Loratadine 10mg tablets
- Loratadine 10mg dissolving tablets
- Loratadine 10mg syrup
- Alavert 10mg tablets
- Alavert 10mg dissolving tablets
- Alavert 10mg syrup
- Tavist ND 10mg tablets

These generic versions of loratadine cost as little as \$3 to \$20 for a month's supply. The Claritin brand of nonprescription loratadine costs more, from \$23 to \$40.

Most health insurers limit their coverage of the three more expensive prescription antihistamines, or require a higher co-pay for them. You can usually appeal to try one of those drugs if you respond poorly or not at all to loratadine.

If your allergy symptoms are severe, you and your doctor should be alert to the signs of asthma. Most people who have asthma have underlying allergies.

The information in this brief was last updated in September 2005.

Antihistamines Cost Comparison

	Generic Name with Dose per Day	Brand Name	Drug is a Generic ¹	Drug is OTC ²	Use per Day ³	Average Monthly Cost ⁴
	Cetirizine chewable tablet 5mg	Zyrtec	No	No	Two	\$182
	Cetirizine tablet 5mg	Zyrtec	No	No	Two	\$178
	Cetirizine chewable tablet 10mg	Zyrtec	No	No	One	\$85
	Cetirizine tablet 10mg	Zyrtec	No	No	One	\$82
	Cetirizine Syrup 10mg/10ml	Zyrtec	No	No	One	\$123
	Desloratadine dissolving tablet 5mg	Clarinet Reditabs	No	No	One	\$101
	Desloratadine syrup 5mg/10ml	Clarinet	No	No	One	\$52
	Desloratadine tablet 5mg	Clarinet	No	No	One	\$90
	Fexofenadine tablet 30mg	Allegra	No	No	Four	\$121
	Fexofenadine capsule 60mg	Allegra	No	No	Two	\$85
	Fexofenadine tablet 60mg	Allegra	No	No	Two	\$106
	Fexofenadine tablet 180mg	Allegra	No	No	One	\$93
CR BEST BUY	Loratadine dissolving tablet 10mg	Alavert	BG	Yes	One	\$18
	Loratadine dissolving tablet 10mg	Claritin Reditabs	BG	Yes	One	\$23-\$36
CR BEST BUY	Loratadine dissolving tablet 10mg	Generic	Yes	Yes	One	\$15-\$24
CR BEST BUY	Loratadine tablet 10mg	Alavert	BG	Yes	One	\$12-\$18
	Loratadine tablet 10mg	Claritin	BG	Yes	One	\$30-\$38
CR BEST BUY	Loratadine tablet 10mg	Generic	Yes	Yes	One	\$3-\$14
CR BEST BUY	Loratadine tablet 10mg	Tavist ND	BG	Yes	One	\$18-\$20
CR BEST BUY	Loratadine syrup 10mg/10ml	Alavert	BG	Yes	One	\$20-\$28
	Loratadine syrup 10mg/10ml	Claritin	BG	Yes	One	\$27-\$40
CR BEST BUY	Loratadine syrup 10mg/10ml	Generic	Yes	Yes	One	\$20-\$25
	Cetirizine/pseudoephedrine tablet 5/120mg ⁵	Zyrtec-D	No	No	Two	\$86
	Loratadine/pseudoephedrine tablet 5/120mg	Alavert-D	BG	Yes	Two	\$54
	Loratadine/pseudoephedrine tablet 5/120mg	Claritin-D	BG	Yes	Two	\$36-\$69
	Loratadine/pseudoephedrine tablet 5/120mg	Generic	Yes	Yes	Two	\$53
	Loratadine/pseudoephedrine tablet 10/240mg	Claritin-D	BG	Yes	One	\$27-\$56
	Loratadine/pseudoephedrine tablet 10/240mg	Generic	Yes	Yes	One	\$7-\$31

(1) "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 but one given a special name by its generic manufacturer. In this table, for example, Claritin, Alavert and Tavist are branded generics. "No" means it is a brand-name drug not yet available as a generic or a branded generic.

(2) OTC stands for over-the-counter; "yes" means it is a nonprescription OTC drug.

(3) Frequency of use reflects usual or typical frequency; some products may be used more or less frequently.

(4) For drugs available by prescription only, monthly costs reflect nationwide retail average prices for March 2005, rounded to the nearest dollar; data provided by NDCHealth, a health-care information company. For drugs available OTC, monthly costs reflect average prices or price ranges obtained in July 2005 from Rite Aid, a large national drug store chain with 3,400 stores in 30 states.

(5) Pseudoephedrine is a decongestant. Such products should be used with caution by people with high blood pressure, heart conditions, diabetes, glaucoma, or prostate disease.