

Treating Allergies, Hay Fever, and Hives: Comparing Effectiveness, Safety, and Price

There are newer antihistamines.

Antihistamines are drugs that can relieve the symptoms of hay fever, hives, and other allergies.

Newer drugs include Allegra, Claritin, Clarinex, Zyrtec, and Xyzal. They are available as generics and over-the-counter drugs.

It is important to treat allergies.

If you have allergies, antihistamines are likely to help. It is important to treat allergies. Without treatment, you are more likely to get asthma, sinus infections, and lung infections.

You may need to try several antihistamines before you find one that works for you.

When should I see a doctor?

You should see a doctor before you take antihistamines regularly. Make sure that you do have allergies, and not a cold or the flu, asthma, or more serious problems.

If you have severe allergies, you may need additional medicines. You should see a doctor immediately if you have serious breathing problems with your allergy.

Compare the older and newer drugs.

- The newer drugs are as safe and effective as the older drugs (Benadryl Allergy, Chlor-Trimeton Allergy, Dimetapp Allergy).
- The newer drugs make you less drowsy.
- You can take most newer antihistamines once a day. Older ones must be taken two or more times a day.

Watch out for drowsiness.

The older drugs cause more drowsiness and slow down



Both the old and newer antihistamines help relieve allergy symptoms. The newer drugs make you less drowsy.

your reaction time. These side effects can be dangerous. They increase accidents in the car, at home, and at work.

The newer drugs make you less drowsy than the older drugs. But problems can happen, especially with higher doses. Alcohol increases drowsiness. Children, teens, and seniors may have more problems with drowsiness.

Other side effects of antihistamines.

Less serious side effects include dry mouth, nose, or throat, hoarseness, headache, dizziness, and nausea. More serious side effects should be reported to your doctor. They include rapid or pounding heartbeats, unusual weakness, nervousness, stomach pain, yellowing of the skin, problems urinating, and vision problems.

Antihistamines can affect other drugs. Tell your doctor all the drugs you take, including over-the-counter drugs.

Our advice:

The newer antihistamines cause less drowsiness than the older ones. But they don't relieve symptoms any better.

We have selected the following as *Consumer Reports Best Buy Drugs*:

 **Cetirizine** tablets

 **Loratadine** tablets, dissolving tablets, and liquid

 **Alavert** dissolving tablets

Using generics can save you hundreds of dollars a year. All these drugs are low-cost generics. You can buy them without a prescription.

Our Best Buy nonprescription medicines are available in 10 mg doses. Should you need to take a larger dose to get symptom relief, try taking 20 mg of our Best Buys (two pills or portions). (Note that this increases your chances of having side effects, including feeling drowsy.) If that does not work, talk to your doctor. You might need to try another class of medicine.

For hay fever in children, we advise trying loratadine first. It is less likely to cause drowsiness.

Antihistamines: Drug Comparison Chart

Consumer Reports Best Buy Drugs are in blue. We recommend these drugs because they work as well and are as safe as the other drugs, and they cost less. This symbol  means that the drug may be available for a low cost through large chain stores, such as Kroger, Sam's Club, Target, Walmart, Costco, CVS, Kmart, and Walgreens. There may be membership fees or other restrictions.

Best Buy	Generic Name & Strength	Brand Name ¹	OTC? ²	Usual Adult Dose ³	Average Cost per Month ⁴	Low Cost
	Azelastine nasal spray/pump 137 mcg	Generic	No	Two sprays per nostril, two times a day	\$100	
	Azelastine nasal spray/pump 137 mcg	Astelin	No	Two sprays per nostril, two times a day	\$203	
	Cetirizine tablet 10 mg	Zyrtec	Yes	One	\$19	
	Cetirizine tablet 10 mg	Generic	Yes	One	\$11	
	Desloratadine dissolving tablet 2.5 mg	Clarinet Reditabs	No	One	\$237	
	Desloratadine tablet 5 mg	Clarinet	No	One	\$201	
	Desloratadine tablet 5 mg	Generic	No	One	\$97	
	Fexofenadine tablet 180 mg	Allegra	Yes	One	\$24	
	Fexofenadine tablet 180 mg	Generic	Yes	One	\$18	
	Levocetirizine tablet 5 mg	Xyzal	No	One	\$119	
	Levocetirizine tablet 5 mg	Generic	No	One	\$59	
	Loratadine dissolving tablet 10 mg	Alavert (BG)	Yes	One	\$12	
	Loratadine tablet 10 mg	Claritin	Yes	One	\$22	
	Loratadine tablet 10 mg	Generic	Yes	One	\$8	
	Olopatadine nasal spray	Patanase	No	Two sprays per nostril, two times a day	\$153	

¹ "Generic" indicates that the drug is sold as a generic. "BG" means it is a branded generic, which is a generic copy of an original drug given a special name by its manufacturer. In this table, for example, Alavert is a branded generic.

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

³ Frequency of use reflects recommendations on the package insert; some products can be used more or less frequently.

⁴ For drugs available by prescription only, monthly costs reflect nationwide retail average prices for February 2013, rounded to the nearest dollar. Data is provided by Symphony Health Solutions, which is not involved in our analysis or recommendations. For drugs available OTC, prices were obtained by Consumer Reports secret shoppers from five major chain pharmacies (CVS, Rite Aid, Target, Walgreens, and Walmart) and local supermarkets across the U.S. in January 2013, and in some cases, prices were obtained by Consumer Reports in June 2013 at the online sites of those chain pharmacies. The prices from the various stores were averaged to yield per-pill prices, which were then converted into a monthly price based on the maximum recommended number of pills per day.