

Best Way to Beat Cold Symptoms

You feel terrible. You're coughing, you've got a stuffy nose, a sore throat—the full monty. But which products are worth the money and which should you skip? CONSUMER REPORTS chose the best over-the-counter drugs based on effectiveness and safety. Use our picks below to treat a run-of-the-mill cold. But keep in mind that certain symptoms, such as shortness of breath, chest pain, a high fever, or an illness that worsens after seven days, warrant a trip to a health care professional. All of the products noted are name brands, but CONSUMER REPORTS secret shoppers have found that you can save up to **73** percent by picking a generic version.

FOR NASAL CONGESTION

Take: *Afrin* (generic oxymetazoline) nasal spray

Skip: *Sudafed PE* (generic phenylephrine) tablet

The nasal spray wins because its active ingredients work fast to shrink swollen nasal blood vessels, which will help you breathe easier. Sprays used short-term are also a better first choice because they cause fewer side effects than oral decongestants—if you stick to the recommended dose—since they're usually not absorbed into your bloodstream in significant amounts like oral decongestants. The active ingredient in *Afrin* is also in *Dristan* and *Vicks Sinex*, which are two other good options for 12-hour congestion relief. Sprays containing phenylephrine, such as *Neo-Synephrine*, also work well but last only up to 4 hours. Be sure to limit over-the-counter nasal-spray use to no more than three days or you could end up with rebound congestion, leaving your nose even stuffier.

If you're still congested after three days, you can try an oral product containing pseudoephedrine (*Sudafed* and generic). You'll have to ask for it since they're kept behind the pharmacy counter; the less-effective *Sudafed PE* is stocked on open store shelves.

But if you have glaucoma, heart disease, high blood pressure, an enlarged prostate, or thyroid disease, check with your doctor or pharmacist before using any type of decongestant, including sprays, since they might worsen those conditions.

FOR A RUNNY NOSE

Take: *Chlor-Trimeton* (generic chlorpheniramine)

Skip: *Alka-Seltzer Plus Cold ez Cough*

The single-ingredient antihistamine *Chlor-Trimeton* beats out the multidrugremedy *Alka-Seltzer Plus Cold and Cough*. The *Alka-Seltzer* product has an antihistamine, too. But it also contains a pain reliever, a cough suppressant, and a decongestant, which is overkill if you just have the sniffles. Taking all those extra medications puts you at risk for possible side effects. Besides, neither dextromethorphan (a cough suppressant) nor phenylephrine in pill form (a decongestant) work very well.

The downside of using older antihistamines like *Chlor-Trimeton* are side effects that include drowsiness, dry eyes and mouth, and urinary retention. Newer antihistamines, such as *Claritin* (generic loratadine) and *Zyrtec* (generic cetirizine), work better for allergies but not as well for colds. Before you reach into your medicine cabinet, your best bets might be to have a bowl of chicken soup, drink a cup of tea, and head for bed early.

FOR A COUGH

Take: Luden's throat drops

Skip: *Robitussin* (dextromethorphan) cough syrup

Fits of coughing and hacking can be upsetting, but *Robitussin* syrup or a whole slew of other OTC remedies that contain dextromethorphan won't do much to stop them. You're better off sucking on a lozenge, such as Luden's throat drops. They contain pectin and honey, which coat

your raw throat and soothe the tickle that often triggers a coughing fit. Even easier: Try a spoonful of honey, which worked better than a honey-flavored cough syrup in a published study. But don't give honey to babies younger than 12 months old because it could contain botulism spores, which can be dangerous to them due to their immature immune systems.

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