

What Claritin Over-the-Counter (OTC) Means to You

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Many allergy symptoms have been treated with drugs that block the action of histamine, called antihistamines. Early, or "first-generation," antihistamines block histamine well but have side effects including sedation, impaired performance and learning, dry mouth, and constipation. Newer, or "second-generation," antihistamines have been developed specifically to avoid these side effects. These newer antihistamines (Claritin, Allegra, Clarinex, Zyrtec and, previously, Seldane and Hismanal) are no more efficacious in blocking histamine effects than the older antihistamines, but their side effect profile has made them tremendously popular. For these reasons of safety and popularity, the FDA has allowed Claritin to be the first of this group to go OTC.

As an OTC drug, Claritin is readily available without a prescription. On the other hand, OTC medications are not generally covered as a "pharmacy benefit" under insurance coverage. Thus, Claritin and similar drugs are no longer covered by some medical insurance plans. Second-generation antihistamines are "therapeutically equivalent" (that is, they have similar efficacy and safety profiles in most individuals) so insurers are justified in this change. Some may cover these drugs with "prior authorization," but it has been our experience that "prior authorization" requests are generally rejected, except under extreme circumstances. To help our patients with these changes, we would like to offer some guidance in the use of antihistamines:

1. Try Claritin OTC, but shop around for best pricing. Competition from Alavert, a generic equivalent, or generic loratadine (available in some pharmacies) should help bring prices down.
2. Many patients can tolerate first-generation antihistamines, especially if only taken at bedtime [diphenhydramine (Benadryl) 25 - 50 mg, or chlorpheniramine (Chlortrimetron) 4 - 12 mg]. Generics are very inexpensive. We suggest starting at low-dose and building up slowly to improve tolerance. Individuals with occupations where any impairment of performance is of concern should not use first-generation antihistamines.
3. If additional antihistamine is needed, add a second-generation antihistamine in the AM to the PM dose of first-generation antihistamine, but do so as-needed.
4. Try generic prescription first-generation antihistamines. You can discuss these options with your allergist to see if any is right for you.
5. Talk to your employer's benefits manager about coverage of the prescription second-generation antihistamines. As purchasers of your benefit package, these individuals form "the market" for pharmacy benefit packages.
6. Talk with your allergist about alternatives to antihistamines. You may be a good candidate for nasal steroids, for allergy shots for more sustained relief of your allergy symptoms, or for participation in a clinical trial where these therapies can be provided to you at no charge.

The physicians and staff of Colorado Allergy and Asthma Centers, P.C. are dedicated to working with you to provide you with the best allergy care available. Please let us know if your allergy symptoms are not adequately covered.