

Hack! Achoo! What to Buy for Cold and Flu

How to quickly find the right product to relieve your symptoms

Searching shelves for cold and flu products is the last thing you need to do when you're sick. Follow three steps to quickly find the right over-the-counter (OTC) product, says pharmacist Alex Luli, PharmD:

1. Ignore what the front of the package says.
2. Scan the ingredients list on the back instead.
3. Match your symptom to these ingredients.



ACHES PAIN FEVER

Ingredient: Acetaminophen

TIP
Found in many products. Read labels on all you use to stay within safe dosages: 4,000 mg/day.

NASTY COUGH

Ingredient: Dextromethorphan

TIP
Suppresses cough during the day. Helps with sleep at night.

STUFFY NOSE

Ingredient: Pseudoephedrine

TIP
Use caution if your blood pressure is high. If well-controlled, short-term use is OK. If not, consult your doctor or pharmacist.

(available behind pharmacy counter)

RUNNY NOSE/SNEEZING

Ingredient: Cetirizine, loratadine, fexofenadine

TIP
These second generation antihistamines won't sedate you or fog your thinking.

SORE THROAT

Ingredient: Menthol or benzocaine

For quick, short-term relief of sore throat/cough.

Take-home tips

- **Less is more.** Choose multi-symptom products only if they match your symptoms. “I usually find people only need one ingredient,” says Dr. Luli. “Loading up on multi-ingredient products increases your risk of side effects without added benefit.”
- **Don’t double up on dosage.** When using more than one OTC product — especially if one has multiple ingredients — read each box. Exceeding the daily limit for an ingredient like acetaminophen can damage your liver.
- **Read the fine print.** “Just because you can buy a product without a prescription doesn’t mean it’s safe for everyone,” he says. Check the warnings for health conditions and medications that interact with OTC products.

Some cold and flu product ingredients aren’t proven to be effective. He does not routinely recommend products with:

- **Zinc.** “Some studies find that starting it within 24 to 48 hours reduces cold symptoms’ severity and duration. Others find it has no effect,” he says. And the cost of lozenges adds up.
- **Guaifenesin:** This expectorant, which loosens mucus and phlegm, is common in cough medications. “We don’t have strong data proving that it even works,” says Dr. Luli.
- **Chlorpheniramine or doxylamine:** These older-generation antihistamines can stop a runny nose. But they increase drowsiness and decrease concentration.
- **Phenylephrine:** This is present in some nasal sprays. “Overall, the data says phenylephrine doesn’t work any better than placebo or saline spray,” he notes.

Armed with the information you need to find ingredients that work, you’ll soon be on the road to recovery.

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