



The Best OTC Meds for Men

We have your head-to-toe fixes for flaking scalp, funky feet, and every problem in between

BY PAIGE GREENFIELD • ILLUSTRATION BY I LOVE DUST

THERE'S SAFETY IN THE PRESCRIPTION PAD—doctor's orders remove all doubt about which pill to pop. But without the chicken scratch on that scrip to guide you, do you know which meds are best? More than 100,000 are available over the counter and contain over 1,000 active ingredients—which you probably ignore. In fact, a new Northwestern University study reveals that 59 percent of people don't always check the contents of their OTC drugs. "Most people shop by symptom, not ingredient," says study author Michael Wolf, Ph.D., M.P.H.

It's time to stop buying blind. We interviewed the experts, decoded the labels, and removed the child-safety caps, all to create this guide to the best over-the-counter remedies for men.



Allergies

Your OTC solution
LORATADINE

TRY Claritin

Allegra, Claritin, and Zyrtec are equally effective at fighting allergy symptoms. But Claritin still wins by a nose, says Lauren Schlesselman, Pharm.D., a pharmacy professor at the University of Connecticut. Zyrtec can make you sleepy, and while both Claritin and Allegra are labeled “non-drowsy,” Claritin is slightly less likely to cross the blood-brain barrier and cause sleepiness. Dose up daily at the same time to keep blood levels steady. Sinus pain? Opt for Claritin-D.



Chest congestion

Your OTC solution
GUAIFENESIN

TRY Mucinex

Feel like rubber cement is coating your lungs? Grab guaifenesin. This ingredient thins mucus, making it easier to expel, and may even halt mucus production. Take the maximum number of doses for 3 or 4 days, even if you feel better, says W. Steven Pray, Ph.D., D.Ph., a professor of pharmacy at Southwestern Oklahoma State University. But skip guaifenesin/cough suppressant combos; these make it tough for you to expel thinned-out mucus, say Wake Forest University researchers.



Dandruff

Your OTC solution
KETOCONAZOLE

TRY Nizoral A-D

If it snows wherever you go, you can blame a fungus called *Pityrosporum ovale*. Change the forecast with Nizoral A-D, the only nonprescription shampoo that contains the anti-fungal ketoconazole, says Pray. Just limit your lathering to once every 3 days; any more can cause irritation. The rest of the time, Pray recommends shampooing with Head & Shoulders, which contains zinc pyrithione, a compound that slows the shedding of skin cells on your scalp.



Dry cough

Your OTC solution
DEXTROMETHORPHAN

TRY Delsym

To quell a cough, you need to target your brain, not your lungs. “Dextromethorphan acts on your brain’s medulla to raise the cough threshold, so it requires more irritation to produce a cough,” says Stefanie Ferreri, Pharm.D., a pharmacy professor at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. To avoid hacking at 2 a.m., take the extended-release stuff—it lasts for up to 12 hours. Take it with honey to boost saliva production and lubricate your airway, suggest British scientists.



Gas

Your OTC solution
SIMETHICONE

TRY Gas-X

Simethicone will take all the air out of your balloon. That may sound gross, but it works: The ingredient breaks the surface tension of gas bubbles so they can combine and more easily (read: stealthily) pass through your system, Dr. Schlesselman says. Take it three or four times a day as needed, in doses of 60 to 125 milligrams. And next time, act preemptively and take Beano right before a big meal. It contains alpha-galactosidase, which breaks down gas-producing carbs.



Acid reflux

Your OTC solution
IMMEDIATE-RELEASE OMEPRAZOLE

TRY Zegerid

Apparently all acid-reflux drugs must begin with a *P* or a *Z*: Prilosec OTC, Prevacid, Zantac. Now there’s Zegerid, possibly zee best yet. It contains a quick-release form of the omeprazole found in Prilosec OTC. Taken before breakfast, it was more effective than lansoprazole (Prevacid) at quelling acid over 24 hours, a Northwestern University study found. A word of caution: Zegerid has 304 milligrams of sodium per pill, so if you have to restrict your salt, stick with Prilosec.



Cold sore

Your OTC solution
DOCOSANOL + BENZOCAINE

TRY Abreva + Anbesol Cold Sore Therapy

Call in the balm squad. Abreva is the only OTC med that contains docosanol, which targets cold-sore-causing herpes. “It strengthens cell walls to keep the virus from infiltrating healthy cells and shortens the duration of outbreaks,” says Pray. In a Canadian study, docosanol users had faster healing of oral lesions than a placebo group did. At the first sign of a sore, smear on Abreva. Then, a few hours later, apply numbing Anbesol. Repeat the Abreva five times a day.



Insomnia

Your OTC solution
DOXYLAMINE

TRY Unisom SleepTabs

Insomnia is nothing to sneeze at, but if you’re acting as if you’re allergic to sleep, pop an antihistamine. Benadryl and other diphenhydramine-based drugs can help you drift off; however, the antihistamine doxylamine is more sedating. Plus, it’s less likely to cause “paradoxical wakefulness,” when your sleeping pill leaves you wide awake, says W. Christopher Winter, M.D., the *Men’s Health* sleep advisor. Take a 25-milligram tab about a half hour before bedtime, he says.



Motion sickness

Your OTC solution
MECLIZINE

TRY Dramamine Less Drowsy Formula

Dramamine Original Formula is all you need—assuming you’re not planning to stay awake. For something less soporific but just as effective, look for a med that contains meclizine, which quiets both the brain region that controls vomiting and the part of your inner ear that detects movement, say researchers at St. John’s University. Meclizine is also the longest-acting motion-sickness antihistamine, so one dose can last for 12 to 24 hours, the scientists say.



Pain/fever

Your OTC solution
IBUPROFEN

TRY Advil

Whether you need it for pain or fever, ibuprofen has the edge on acetaminophen, a 2010 Wake Forest University review concluded. It also beats out other NSAIDs; aspirin is now recommended almost exclusively for cardio protection. And while Dr. Schlesselman suggests limiting naproxen (Aleve) to once every 12 hours, you can swallow ibuprofen every 4 hours, reducing the chance of between-dose pain. Ibuprofen may trigger GI trouble, so always pop your pill with a meal.



Diarrhea

Your OTC solution
LOPERAMIDE + SIMETHICONE

TRY Imodium Multi-Symptom Relief

Why the bowel blowout? Your intestinal muscles are contracting too fast, so your gut can't absorb water and nutrients. Loperamide slows those contractions, unlike Pepto-Bismol, which only tells your body to make less fluid, says Dr. Schlesselman. Try Imodium Multi-Symptom Relief, which has loperamide *and* simethicone. The duo eases diarrhea faster than loperamide alone, a 2007 University of Chicago study found.



Sore throat

Your OTC solution
BENZOCAINE + IBUPROFEN

TRY Cepacol Ultra Sore Throat Spray + Advil

Suck on all the lozenges you want, but for immediate relief, open wide and spritz your throat with numbing, pain-fighting benzocaine. Dr. Schlesselman recommends. Then, once the tenderness eases up, take a dose of ibuprofen. "The spray makes it easier to swallow the pill and will hold you over until the ibuprofen has had a chance to bring down the painful inflammation in your throat," Dr. Schlesselman says.



Jock itch/athlete's foot

Your OTC solution
TERBINAFINE HYDROCHLORIDE

TRY Lamisil AT

Think of jock itch as a fungal forest, and terbinafine hydrochloride as your defoliant. It not only kills the fungus but also surrounds the fungal cells' walls so the cells can't divide and spread. "Keep applying it for an entire month, even if the problem appears to clear up," says Dr. Schlesselman. "There may be fungus you can't see." Stick with terbinafine cream, which penetrates more deeply than a spray does.



Minor burns and cuts

Your OTC solution
PETROLATUM

TRY Aquaphor Healing Ointment

Ignore the instinct to grab an antibiotic ointment: In a study published in the *Journal of the American Academy of Dermatology*, petrolatum-based Aquaphor prevented scabbing and healed minor wounds faster than Neosporin did. Apply it three times a day to strengthen your skin's protective barrier, cleaning and covering the wound each time. "Keeping it moist and protected prevents scabs that can lead to scars," says Pray.



Occasional heartburn

Your OTC solution
CALCIUM CARBONATE

TRY Caltrate

Most heartburn meds will douse the flames in your esophagus, but at what cost? Calcium carbonate rapidly neutralizes stomach acid with fewer side effects than sodium bicarbonate (Alka-Seltzer), which can cause gas and bloating, or magnesium hydroxide (Maalox), which can cause diarrhea. Dr. Schlesselman recommends chewing the tablets thoroughly and then chugging a glass of water to help them dissolve.



Red eyes

Your OTC solution
TETRAHYDROZOLINE + HYPROMELLOSE

TRY Visine Maximum Redness Relief Formula

Your eyes are the windows to what you did last night. Hide minor redness with drops of tetrahydrozoline, a decongestant that immediately shrinks the swollen blood vessels that give you that bleary-eyed look. For extended relief, Pray suggests buying drops that also contain the lubricant hypromellose, derived from the cell walls of plants; it relieves irritation and keeps tetrahydrozoline from draining out of your eyes, he says.



Germly mouth

Your OTC solution
CETYLPYRIDINIUM CHLORIDE

TRY Crest Pro-Health Multi-Protection Rinse

A bar of soap won't fix your filthy mouth. After brushing, use a mouthwash with bacteria-fighting cetylpyridinium chloride (CPC), such as Crest Pro-Health Multi-Protection. It's alcohol-free, so it won't dry your mouth and wipe out bacteria-fighting enzymes in your saliva. "Use the clear version because CPC can cause dyes to stain your teeth," says Manhattan-based dentist Jennifer Jablow, D.D.S.



Acne

Your OTC solution
SALICYLIC ACID + BENZOYL PEROXIDE

TRY Neutrogena Oil-Free Acne Wash + Clean & Clear Persa-Gel 10

Put the brakes on breakouts by pairing two well-known zit zappers. The combo of salicylic acid and benzoyl peroxide fights acne better than benzoyl alone, say Harvard scientists. Use a 2 percent salicylic acid face wash, and then apply a 5 to 10 percent benzoyl peroxide ointment overnight, says Northwestern University dermatologist Amy Derick, M.D. Bacne? Try a salicylic-acid body wash, like Irish Spring's new Clear & Fresh Skin.



Itchiness

Your OTC solution
HYDROCORTISONE + PRAMOXINE HYDROCHLORIDE

TRY Cortizone-10 Maximum Strength + Caladryl Clear Anti-Itch Lotion

Quit yer itchin'. A 2011 Mount Sinai Hospital study found that hydrocortisone combined with the numbing agent pramoxine hydrochloride rapidly reduced itching. You won't find an OTC product with both, so simultaneously smear on Cortizone-10 Maximum Strength and Caladryl Clear Anti-Itch Lotion. It should do the trick for mosquito bites as well as rashes from poison ivy, oak, or sumac, says Dr. Schlesselman.



Canker sores

Your OTC solution
BENZOCAINE + CETYLPYRIDINIUM CHLORIDE + BENZOIN

TRY Kank-A Mouth Pain Liquid

You're looking at a mouthful of misery unless you follow this three-part plan from Dr. Jablow. You want (1) numbing benzocaine, (2) cetylpyridinium chloride to keep oral bacteria out of the wound, and (3) benzoin tincture to create a bandagelike layer over your sore. The only OTC product that has it all: Kank-A Mouth Pain Liquid. After applying it, avoid spicy or acidic foods, which may dissolve the protective film. ■