Finding OTC Relief for Respiratory Symptoms

*Aaachoo!* Sniffles, sneezes, coughs and congestion can make you feel miserable. Before you reach for a multi-symptom product like Nyquil, consider whether you really need all of those active ingredients. If you only have one or two symptoms, using medicines containing multiple drugs can expose you to unwanted side effects, especially if you take other medications.

So which drugs are best for targeting your respiratory symptoms? Here’s a look at types of over-the-counter (OTC) options available in your drugstore’s cold medicine aisle.

**Nasal Decongestants**
Dealing with a stuffy nose? Decongestant pills containing pseudoephedrine or phenylephrine can get you breathing easier. Nasal spray with oxymetazoline or phenylephrine can help, too. However, don’t use nasal sprays longer than three days. Overuse can make congestion worse by causing rebound symptoms as the medication wears off.

*How they work:* Decongestants narrow the blood vessels in your nasal lining, causing the swollen tissue to shrink so more air can pass through.

**Pain Relievers**
The two main types of OTC pain meds are acetaminophen and nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs). Aspirin, ibuprofen and naproxen are NSAIDs. Any of these pain relievers help lower a fever and stop pain, but NSAIDs also reduce swelling. So if you have sinusitis, for example, NSAIDs will ease inflammation in you breathing easier. Nasal spray with oxymetazoline or phenylephrine can help, too. However, don’t use nasal sprays longer than three days. Overuse can make congestion worse by causing rebound symptoms as the medication wears off.

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**Staying Active With Asthma**

*If you suffer* from asthma, it’s not uncommon to experience coughing, wheezing, chest tightness or shortness of breath during or after exercising. But, in most cases, that doesn’t mean you have to avoid exercising. In fact, a study in the *BMJ Open Respiratory Research* journal found that people who exercised 30 minutes per day had 2.5 times more control over asthma symptoms.

Activities such as yoga, walking, leisurely bike riding and swimming in a warm environment are least likely to cause asthma symptoms, according to the Asthma and Allergy Foundation of America.

Ask your doctor about how to exercise safely with asthma. You’ll probably be told to avoid exercising when pollen counts or pollution levels are high. It’s also smart to warm up before exercising, cover your mouth and nose with a scarf in cold weather, and use medication as prescribed.

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the sinuses, as well as reduce the pain.

**How they work:** Both acetaminophen and NSAIDs interfere with chemicals in the body that produce, transmit or receive pain sensations. NSAIDs specifically block enzymes known to contribute to pain and swelling.

**Antihistamines**

For allergies that bring on sneezing, runny nose, hives, rashes or itchy eyes, an antihistamine can provide welcome relief. However, antihistamines are generally not very effective for treating nasal symptoms caused by the common cold.

First-generation antihistamines include brompheniramine, chlorpheniramine, dimenhydrinate, diphenhydramine and doxylamine. These drugs can make you sleepy and are often found in sleep aids. Second-generation antihistamines like loratadine, cetirizine, and fexofenadine are less likely to cause drowsiness and are often used to head off symptoms before they strike. Since many antihistamines also contain decongestants and/or pain relievers, always read labels or check with your pharmacist before taking with other medications.

**How they work:** When you’re exposed to certain allergens, your body produces histamine, a chemical that attaches to your cells and triggers an immune response. Antihistamines prevent the histamines from attaching to cells, which keeps your body from reacting to harmless allergens as if they were dangerous germs.

**Cough Medicine**

When you have a cough, you have two treatment options. You can use an expectorant like guaifenesin or a suppressant like dextromethorphan. An expectorant is best when chest congestion is caused by a cold or bronchitis and is producing a wet, chesty cough. A cough suppressant is better for calming dry coughs that disrupt your day or keep you awake at night.

**How they work:** Expectorants break up fluids trapped in your lungs, making it easier for mucus to be coughed up. Suppressants block your cough reflex.

When taking multiple OTC drugs, read labels to avoid doubling up on active ingredients. If you take prescription medications, you may need to avoid certain cold and allergy drugs. To be safe, ask your pharmacist for assistance.

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**Surprising Asthma Triggers**

Knowing what triggers your asthma can help you avoid those things that can take your breath away. Most people with asthma know what commonly sets off their symptoms, e.g., pollen, dust, pet dander, weather, respiratory illness, exercise, tobacco smoke or pollution. Other triggers are less known. For instance, taking certain pain meds can cause asthma to flare up.

Here are few more asthma triggers that may surprise you.

**Acid reflux and GERD.** An estimated 75 percent of adults with asthma also have GERD, or gastroesophageal reflux disease. Doctors and researchers aren’t entirely sure what connects the two diseases, but surmise that when stomach acid backs up into the esophagus, it damages your throat’s lining and lungs’ airways. This makes breathing more difficult. Avoiding foods that worsen acid reflux—like caffeine; spicy, fried or fatty foods; and citrus fruits—can help control asthma symptoms, too.

**Scented candles.** A cinnamon-scented candle may smell homey, but its aromatics could be harmful if you suffer from chemical hypersensitivity. Researchers from the University of Washington found that one-third of people with asthma have this condition, and many of them have negative reactions to fragrances.

**Emotions.** When strong emotions lead to shouting, crying or even laughter, breathing changes occur that can cause an asthma attack, reports the American College of Allergy, Asthma and Immunology. Panic accompanied by rapid breathing can worsen an attack.

**Alcohol.** Wine is the most common alcoholic asthma trigger, but beer and liquor also can trigger asthmatic reactions. Alcoholic drinks contain histamine, a chemical produced by yeast and bacteria during the fermentation process. And histamine is what triggers allergy-like symptoms. (That’s why we take antihistamine drugs to fight allergies!)
Claiming that your food sensitivity or preference is an allergy may seem like a little white lie, but in a restaurant this triggers a long chain of steps to prevent cross-contamination of ingredients. Fresh knives, cutting boards, cookware and fryers must be used, creating extra work for kitchen staff and possible service delays for you and other diners. These steps are unnecessary for those with a food intolerance or preference. Plus, false claims of allergies may make others less sensitive to those with true allergies, which could put those individuals in danger.

Is It Really an Allergy?
Food intolerances and food allergies are not the same thing. An intolerance to ingredients like lactose, gluten, MSG or sulfites is often confused with an allergy because, like allergies, food sensitivities can cause an upset stomach, flushing, headache, diarrhea or abdominal cramps. However, a true food allergy causes the immune system to respond to food as if it’s a threat. This can cause reactions like an itchy or swollen mouth, hives, tightness in the throat, trouble breathing, a drop in blood pressure, or even life-threatening anaphylaxis. An immune response to food can occur within minutes of eating a food or up to several hours after exposure.

Expressing Preferences
If you don’t react well to certain foods, but you don’t have an allergy, here’s how you can ensure you get the meal you want:

1. Read restaurant menus online before visiting to plan what you will eat.
2. Ask your server about ingredient alternatives—don’t claim food allergies you don’t have.
3. Be polite! When invited to dinner parties, ask what will be served. Offer to bring a dish if you’re concerned about the menu.
Now You’re Cooking With Heat

Here’s a hot tip that can add some zip to your meals without increasing calories: Cook with heat. And we don’t mean temperature! Chili peppers—fresh, dried or ground—add a perfect punch of flavor to many dishes. Plus, a large Chinese study published in the British Medical Journal followed more than 400,000 people for four years and found those who ate spicy foods lived longer.

If cooking with hot peppers makes you pause, these tips may help you warm up to the idea.

Get Spicy

If you’re not ready for Dave’s Insanity Sauce but want to heat things up a little, try these tips:

- Always taste hot sauce before pouring it on.
- Mix hot sauce with other condiments—like sriracha sauce with mayonnaise.

Safety Tips

- Taste a small piece of pepper to judge its heat before adding to food.
- Wear protective gloves when handling hot chilies.
- Keep hands away from your eyes after cutting chilies. Residual oils on your fingers can cause painful stinging.
- If you bite into a too-hot pepper, ease the burn with a sip of milk, a bland cracker or a bit of sugar on your tongue.

Be wary of spicy foods if you suffer from IBS, GERD or heartburn. Hot peppers also can trigger asthma symptoms.

MONTHLY CHALLENGE:

Take Small Steps to Cross A Big Fitness Line

Ever dream of completing a marathon? What about a triathlon? If this seems impossible, try breaking down one of these feats into incremental steps you can accomplish over several weeks. Who says you have to finish a race in one day?

Over the next 30 days, for example, you can easily complete the equivalent of a marathon (26.2 miles) by walking or jogging 1.5 miles five days a week. Or, if you have a fitness tracker, you can reach this goal by taking about 52,000 steps (about 2,000 steps equals one mile).

If you like variety or want to really challenge yourself, set your sights on completing a multi-sport race over the course of the month. For instance, triathlons include a half-mile swim, a 15-mile bike ride and a 10k (6.2 miles) run. An Ironman race (not for beginners!) comprises a 2.4-mile swim (4,224 yards), a 112-mile bike ride and a full marathon!

TO GET STARTED:

Create a simple training schedule that fits your lifestyle. Then reward yourself when you meet your goal.