



Get the Best Treatments

You've probably seen them dozens of times: Ads for drugs that promise new solutions to your health-related problems. But are those drugs really the best choice for your condition?

Pharmaceutical companies spend billions to convince us their products are the best choice—\$5.8 billion in 2015 alone in TV, radio, newspaper, magazine, and internet ads according to figures from Kantar Media.

And the promotions work. Our research shows that nearly one of every seven people who take a prescription medication said they've asked their doctors to prescribe a drug they've seen advertised. And nearly two-thirds said their doctor complied with the request, according to a recent survey by Consumer Reports Best Buy Drugs.

The problem is that it's hard for consumers to know if an advertised drug works better than a less expensive

generic or even making a lifestyle change. That's where Consumer Reports Best Buy Drugs can help. Our "Best Buy" recommendations are drugs that are as safe and effective as other medications in their respective classes, and are typically less expensive.

We base our conclusions on systematic reviews from credible sources such as the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality (AHRQ) Evidence-based Practice Centers and the Cochrane Library. Prices of drugs come from Symphony Health Solutions, which is not involved in our analyses or recommendations.

Here are seven smart money-saving swaps to consider:

Find solutions for these seven problems. You may not need a drug after all.



1 SEASONAL ALLERGIES

Best Treatments

Steroid sprays and newer antihistamines are a good, first bet

IF YOU SUFFER from hay fever or other seasonal allergy symptoms, such as congestion, sneezing, and watery eyes, you've got a variety of choices for relief.

But nasal steroid sprays such as fluticasone propionate (Flonase), mometasone furoate (Nasonex), and triamcinolone acetonide (Nasacort) are considered by experts the best, first option for seasonal allergies. Both Flonase and Nasacort are available without a prescription. One downside is that it can take hours or even days before they start to work. And the steroid sprays must be used consistently to get the greatest benefit.

Newer antihistamines aren't any more effective at relieving allergy symptoms than older ones, but they are less likely to cause drowsiness. They also offer the convenience of one pill daily. You'll still have to watch out for other side effects, particularly with high doses.

If you take an antihistamine, don't ignore a rapid heart-beat or heart palpitations. These are rare side effects, but if they occur, see your doctor.

Also good to know: If you take allergy medications regularly, talk with your doctor to make sure your problems stem from allergies. Up to one-third of people with allergy symptoms don't actually have allergies; other conditions, such as a cold or even reactions to certain drugs, can cause the sneezing, congestion, or runny nose typical of allergies.

PHOTOS: ISTOCK

Best Treatments

- OTC nasal steroid spray
- Generic loratadine



2 DEPRESSION

Best Treatments

New research suggests nondrug therapies are as good an option as medication—but both can work well.

EACH YEAR, NEARLY 7 percent of U.S. adults—some 15.7 million people—suffer from a depressive illness that warrants treatment, according to the National Institute of Mental Health. Contrary to ads from pharmaceutical companies that suggest medication is the only answer, the first step is to see your doctor and then possibly a therapist.

A new analysis by AHRQ suggests that cognitive behavioral therapy may be as useful as medication to relieve symptoms of depression. Our experts think it's worth trying as a first step—especially to avoid possible side effects of medication.

Some antidepressants are more likely to cause certain side effects than others. For example, paroxetine is associated with a higher risk of sexual problems, and sertraline is associated with a higher rate of diarrhea.

People respond differently to antidepressants, so if you decide to try a medication, you might have to try several before you find one that works. For up to 45 percent of people, no antidepressant will relieve their depression.

Best Treatments

- 👉 **Talk therapy**
- 👉 **Anti-depressants**
- 👉 **If you already take a medication that works well, don't switch**



3 DIABETES

Best Treatments

Exercise, diet, and weight loss can help keep your blood sugar under control.

IF YOU'RE ONE of the nearly 26 million people in the U.S. with type 2 diabetes, exercise, a healthful diet, and weight loss if needed, are essential to help keep your blood-sugar levels in check. For some people, these might alleviate the need for medication all together.

Several studies show that many people with diabetes can lower their blood-sugar levels almost as much with lifestyle changes alone as with medicines, especially in the early stages of their disease.

If those don't help though, you might need to add a medication. In that case, three older, inexpensive drugs are your best, first options. They're just as effective as most newer medications, and, in some cases, are better and safer.

The best, first option for many people is generic metformin. If that doesn't drop your blood-sugar levels enough, you might need to add one or both of these medications: glimepiride or glipizide. If you also have heart failure or kidney disease, your doctor might start with one of those drugs instead.

All three generic drugs can be found at major chain drugstores and big-box stores for as little as \$4 for a one-month supply or \$10 for three-months.

PHOTOS: ISTOCK

Best Treatments

- Exercise
- Diet
- Weight loss
- Generic metformin, glimepiride, glipizide



4 HEARTBURN

Best Treatments

Powerful drugs like Nexium, Prilosec and Prevacid may be overkill for garden-variety heartburn.

WHEN HEARTBURN FLARES up, many people turn too quickly to powerful drugs called proton pump inhibitors (PPIs) like Nexium, Prilosec 24HR, or Prevacid. But studies show that up to 69 percent of people who are prescribed a PPI don't actually need it. Doing so can also expose you to potentially serious side effects, including an increased risk of pneumonia and fractures of the hip and other bones.

Instead, for mild or infrequent heartburn, first try lifestyle changes or antacids. Cut back on alcohol and caffeine, quit smoking, eat smaller meals, don't lie down for 2 hours after eating, and lose weight if needed.

If those changes don't bring relief, for occasional heartburn, try an inexpensive over-the-counter antacid, such as Maalox, Mylanta, Rolaids, Tums, or their generic equivalents, or other drugs called H2 blockers, such as Pepcid AC, Zantac 150, or their generic equivalents.

If heartburn strikes twice a week or more for several weeks, see a physician. You might have a more serious condition called GERD (gastroesophageal reflux disease). In that case you might need a PPI. Our analysis shows these drugs are equally effective and safe and your pick should be based on the lowest price.

Best Treatments

- 📌 Lifestyle changes
- 📌 OTC antacids



5 HIGH CHOLESTEROL

Best Treatments

You might be able to lower your cholesterol enough with diet and exercise. If not, an inexpensive generic is your best bet.

IF YOU HAVE HIGH cholesterol, a healthful diet and exercise can help lower it. Doing so could mean you no longer need medication. But if lifestyle changes don't lower it enough, you may need a medication called a statin. All these drugs can lower cholesterol, and some reduce it more than others.

If you haven't had a heart attack, the first thing to do is determine with your doctor your overall risk of heart attack or stroke in the next 10 years.

If your 10-year risk is more than 10 percent, and you need to lower your cholesterol to help reduce that risk, determine whether you need a "high" or "moderate" intensity statin.

Consider a moderate-intensity statin if you need to reduce your LDL cholesterol by 50 percent or less.

Or if you are:

- ✦ Older than 75 with a history of heart disease or heart problems.
- ✦ You have an increased risk of side effects from a high-intensity statin—this includes those older than 75, those with multiple and/or serious medical conditions, such as impaired kidney or liver function, those with a

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Best Treatments

↓ **Diet, exercise**

↓ **Generic atorvastatin, lovastatin, pravastatin, simvastatin**

PHOTOS: ISTOCK



5 HIGH CHOLESTEROL

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history of stroke or muscle disorders, those who currently use medications that could interact with statins, and those of Asian heritage.

If you and your doctor have decided a moderate-intensity statin is appropriate, the following are CR Best Buys, based on effectiveness, safety, and cost:

- ✦ Generic atorvastatin 10 mg or 20 mg
- ✦ Generic lovastatin 40 mg
- ✦ Generic pravastatin 40 mg
- ✦ Generic simvastatin 20 mg or 40 mg

Several of these medications can be found for as little as \$4 a month at big-box or chain drugstores including Costco, CVS, Sam's Club, and Walmart.

Consider a high-intensity statin if you need to reduce your cholesterol by 50 percent or more.

Or if you are:

- ✦ Between the ages of 40 and 74, and have an LDL level of 190 mg/dL or greater and have a 10-year heart attack or stroke risk of 10 percent or higher.

In that case, we selected the following as a CR Best Buy:

- ✦ Generic atorvastatin 40 mg or 80 mg

Best Treatments

👉 Diet, exercise

👉 Generic atorvastatin, lovastatin, pravastatin, simvastatin

PHOTOS: ISTOCK



6 INSOMNIA

Best Treatments

New research shows cognitive behavioral therapy can be as helpful as medication.

MOST PEOPLE SUFFER from trouble sleeping once in awhile. But if the problem continues several times a week over a few months, it's time to see a doctor. Insomnia can be caused by other conditions, or as a side effect of medications you already take. If neither of those are the culprit, instead of turning to prescription sedatives, consider with your doctor cognitive behavioral therapy, a form of talk therapy. It helps 70 to 80 percent of people with chronic insomnia. And it appears to be at least as effective as sleeping pills.

If you can't sleep once in a while, you could consider an over-the-counter drug that contains diphenhydramine, like Benadryl or Unisom. But be careful: they can cause next-day drowsiness. Do not take these medications for longer than 14 days.

All insomnia medicines can cause side effects and dependency. Possible side effects include daytime sleepiness, dizziness, unsteadiness, and rebound insomnia.

If you take a prescription sedative, we suggest asking for the generic version of Ambien, called zolpidem. Our analysis finds that by some measures, it's more effective than the others.

Best Treatments

📌 Cognitive behavior therapy

📌 OTC sleep aids like diphenhydramine



7 OVERACTIVE BLADDER

Best Treatments

First try exercises to strengthen your bladder and cut back on caffeine.

IF YOU MAKE more bathroom trips than normal, you may not need a medication. Cutting back on caffeinated beverages and bladder training exercises can often provide relief. Your doctor should also show you how to strengthen your pelvic muscles by doing Kegel exercises and other techniques to strengthen your bladder muscles. That could relieve symptoms enough so that a drug isn't necessary.

Other medications you take, such as those used to treat high blood pressure, could also cause you to urinate frequently. So can having diabetes, heart disease, urinary-tract infections, kidney stones, and strokes. See your doctor to rule out any of these causes before you turn to medication.

Most drugs used to treat overactive bladder are only moderately effective, cutting the number of bathroom trips in a day by two or three, and can cause side effects, including blurred vision, confusion, constipation, dizziness, and dry mouth.

Yet, if after trying lifestyle changes, you and your doctor conclude that a drug is worth trying, you could consider generic extended-release oxybutynin. It offers the convenience of once-a-day dosing and research suggests it has a lower risk of side effects compared to other drugs.

Best Treatments

👉 **Kegels & other exercises**

👉 **Generic extended-release oxybutynin**

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