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OTC LORATADINE

The FDA has approved the marketing of loratadine (*Claritin* – Schering), a second-generation H₁-antihistamine, without a prescription. The drug was also recently approved for OTC use as *Alavert* (Wyeth) and other generics are expected.

FIRST-GENERATION H₁-ANTIHISTAMINES – First-generation H₁-antihistamines such as diphenhydramine (*Benadryl*, and others) or chlorpheniramine (*Chlor-Trimeton*, and others) are inexpensive, but in usual doses may cause somnolence, interfere with learning, decrease work productivity and impair psychomotor performance, and are associated with an increased injury rate (WD Finkle et al, *Ann Allergy Asthma Immunol* 2002; 89:244). The patient may be unaware of these effects, which may persist in the morning after taking the drug at bedtime and may continue to occur during regular use (FE Simons, *Clin Exp Allergy* 1999; 29 suppl 3:125).

SECOND-GENERATION DRUGS – Second-generation H₁-antihistamines penetrate poorly into the brain and are much less likely than the first-generation to have adverse effects on the central nervous system. In recommended doses loratadine and desloratadine, which is an active metabolite of loratadine, are non-sedating, although with higher doses sedation may occur. Fexofenadine has been free of sedative effects even in higher-than-recommended doses. Cetirizine is sedating in some patients, but its safety in young children is better established than that of the other drugs. No well-controlled trials have convincingly established that any one of the second-generation drugs is more effective than any other for treatment of allergic rhinitis and urticaria.

SECOND-GENERATION H₁-ANTIHISTAMINES

Drug	Formulation	Adult dosage (≥12 yrs)	Pediatric Dosage	Cost ¹
Cetirizine – <i>Zyrtec</i> ² (Pfizer)	tablets: 5 mg, 10 mg	5 or 10 mg once/day	6-11 years: 5 or 10 mg once/day 2-5 years: 2.5 or 5 mg once/day or 2.5 mg bid 6 months-2 years: 2.5 mg once/day	\$59.70
Desloratadine – <i>Clarinex</i> (Schering)	tablets: 5mg	5 mg once/day		65.10
Fexofenadine – <i>Allegra</i> (Aventis)	tablets: 30 mg, 60 mg, 180 mg	60 mg bid or 180 mg once/day	6-11 years: 30 mg bid	76.20
Loratadine ³ – <i>Claritin</i> ² (Schering)	tablets: 10 mg	10 mg once/day	6-11 years: 10 mg once/day 2-5 years: 5 mg once/day	30.00 ⁴
<i>Claritin Reditabs</i> ⁵				39.00 ⁴
<i>Alavert</i> ⁵ (Wyeth)				17.10 ⁶

1. Average cost to the patient for 30 days' treatment with the lowest recommended dosage for adults based on data from retail pharmacies nationwide provided by Verispan, Scott-Levin's *SPA*, December 2001 to November 2002.
2. Also available in a syrup formulation: 1 mg/mL.
3. Available over the counter.
4. Cost for 30 days' treatment according to listings on drugstore.com, December 30, 2002.
5. Disintegrating tablets.
6. Cost for 30 days' treatment according to the manufacturer.

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COST — The cost of OTC loratadine is much lower than the full cost of the prescription H₁-antihistamines. If insurance companies respond by raising the co-pay for the prescription drugs, even patients with insurance coverage may pay more for them than they would for OTC loratadine.

CONCLUSION — First-generation H₁-antihistamines can impair psychomotor performance, sometimes without noticeable symptoms. Second-generation H₁-antihistamines are safer. More direct comparisons between the second-generation drugs are needed to determine their relative efficacy in allergic rhinitis and urticaria. For now, the choice among them will probably be determined by their out-of-pocket cost.

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