

Guidelines for Taking OTC Heartburn Medications

What is Heartburn?

Heartburn is the most common symptom of acid reflux, acid indigestion, or gastro esophageal reflux disease (GERD). It is often mild and occasional (episodic), but for some it may be frequent (occurs 2 or more days a week), moderate to severe and long-lasting. For many individuals, heartburn can be controlled by lifestyle and dietary modifications and the proper use of over-the-counter medications.

What Over-the-Counter (OTC) Medications are Available to Treat Heartburn?

Various antacids, H₂-receptor antagonists (H₂-blockers), such as: famotidine and ranitidine and proton pump inhibitors such as omeprazole is available without a prescription. Antacids partially neutralize stomach acid and are used to relieve mild, infrequent heartburn. The H₂-receptor antagonists partially block acid production by inhibiting histamine, one of several chemicals that stimulate acid secretion in the stomach. The lower nonprescription dosages of the H₂ blockers provide a mild degree of acid inhibition. The higher nonprescription dosages of the H₂ antagonists are associated with moderate inhibition of stomach acid and may exert their effect for 6 to 10 hours. The OTC proton pump inhibitor is available at its former prescription strength and act differently from antacids and H₂-blockers. Omeprazole significantly blocks acid production at its source, targeting the "acid pumps" in the stomach. Nonprescription omeprazole is the most powerful acid blocker blocking acid for up to 24 hours with a single dose. Omeprazole is more effective than the H₂-receptor antagonists in preventing heartburn.

How do I know which heartburn medication is the best for me?

Ask your pharmacist before using OTC heartburn medications; maybe you should see a physician, here below are the usual OTC heartburn medications

- *Antacids* - Antacids are typically used to treat mild, occasional heartburn. They provide rapid (within minutes) relief of symptoms, but relief only lasts for about 20 to 30 minutes when taken on an empty stomach. Taking an antacid after a meal prolongs its effect for 2 to 3 hours.
- *H₂-receptor antagonists* - H₂-receptor antagonists are used to treat mild to moderate, infrequent heartburn. These medications begin to relieve heartburn within an hour

and provide a longer duration of relief (6 to 10 hours) when compared to antacids. The lower nonprescription dosages, ranitidine 75 mg, famotidine 10mg, should be used for mild heartburn, whereas the higher nonprescription dosages, ranitidine 150 mg, famotidine 20 mg, should be reserved for more moderate symptoms.

- *Proton pump inhibitors* – Nonprescription OTC omeprazole is intended for people who suffer from frequent heartburn (2 or more days a week). This medication should not be used to treat mild or occasional heartburn. In contrast to the antacids and the H₂-blockers, proton pump inhibitors usually take 2 to 3 hours to begin to relieve your heartburn, but relief often lasts up to 24 hours with once daily dosing. It may take 3 to 4 days for some people to experience the full therapeutic effect of omeprazole but many people get complete relief within 24 hours after the first dose.

Timing of heart burn medication

- ***Antacids*** - Antacids may be taken when needed on an empty stomach or after a meal. The antacid label contains information on how often you can recommend the medication, the maximum amount that can be taken in 24 hours, and what precautions should be observed to prevent adverse effects. This information will vary for different antacid products. Read the packaging label carefully before recommending it if your patient is taking prescription medications or other OTC medications as they may interact with the antacid if taken together.
- ***H₂-receptor antagonists*** - H₂-receptor antagonists may be taken at any time when needed to treat heartburn. Individuals with only daytime heartburn may benefit from taking the medication in the morning whereas those with nighttime heartburn should take the medication in the evening or before bedtime. If it is necessary to take the medication twice daily, it is best to separate the two doses by at least 8 hours. In some individuals, the acid-blocking effect of an H₂-receptor antagonist may decrease with continuous daily administration. This may result in decreased effectiveness¹. Therefore, it is best to take an H₂-receptor antagonist on a "when needed basis" if possible, rather than daily for several weeks. When an H₂-blocker is used to prevent heartburn, it should be taken 10 to 60 minutes before eating food or drinking beverages that cause heartburn.
- ***Proton pump inhibitors*** - In contrast to the H₂-blockers, nonprescription omeprazole should be taken once daily every day for 14 days. Proton pump inhibitors work best 30 to 60 minutes before a meal, you will achieve the greatest effect from this drug. Taking medication in the morning before breakfast is often preferred because most

individuals remember to take their medications at this time. Omeprazole as a single daily dose provides protection against heartburn for up to 24 hours.

How long should you take heartburn medication?

Antacids and H2-receptor antagonists should not be taken for longer than 14 days as the tolerance develops. Nonprescription omeprazole should not be taken for more than one 14-day course of treatment every four months, unless otherwise directed or approved by your doctor.