

Your Ultimate Guide to OTC Medicine

The absolute best remedies for headaches, tummy troubles, muscle pain—you name it.

By **KATE ROCKWOOD**

➔ **YOUR SUMMER BUCKET LIST COMES WITH A** potentially staggering number of minor health woes. Backyard BBQ? Cue heartburn. A weekend hiking trip? Hello, allergies. The good news: In most cases, you can fix the problem with a quick trip to the drugstore. But “there are possible downsides to grabbing the first over-the-counter medication you see on the shelf,” says Jennifer Caudle, DO, a family physician and assistant professor at Rowan University School of Osteopathic Medicine in New Jersey. You want to ensure the meds you choose target your issue. (If OTC meds don’t help, see your doctor.) Here’s how to overcome some of the most common health annoyances so you don’t get sidelined this season.

Test Your Down-There Smarts

’Tis the season for below-the-belt troubles: Wet bathing suits and sweaty workout wear can be breeding grounds for yeast. And urinary tract infections (UTIs) may be more common in summer, especially in women under 40. But do you know how to get relief? Take this quiz.

1 WHAT’S THE TELLTALE SIGN OF A YEAST INFECTION?

- A** Itch, itch, and more itch!
- B** A thick, white discharge
- C** A fishy smell
- D** A burning sensation when you pee

ANSWER: B. Lots of women grab Monistat at the first sign of intense itching. “The problem is that only one-third of the time is a yeast infection the true culprit,” says Mary Jane Minkin, MD, clinical professor of ob-gyn at Yale School of Medicine. Two common issues that frequently mimic it are bacterial vaginosis (BV), which often results in a fishy odor, and contact allergies. “Some of the most sensitive tissue on the body is the perineum, the area between the vaginal opening and the anus,” says Dr. Minkin. “If you have a new soap, that tissue can get irritated and itchy and even cause a thin, watery discharge.”

A cottage cheese-like discharge is the clearest sign of a yeast infection. Go ahead and use an OTC antifungal, but if the symptoms don’t clear up after one treatment or if they recur within a week, call your doctor. She can write you a script for a stronger antifungal—or figure out if something else is causing your symptoms.

2 TRUE OR FALSE: SEVEN-DAY YEAST INFECTION TREATMENTS ARE THE STRONGEST AND BEST RESERVED FOR SEVERE INFECTIONS.

ANSWER: False. Whether you pick a one-, three-, or seven-day treatment is more about personal preference, says Lauren Streicher, MD, clinical associate professor of ob-gyn at Northwestern University and author of *Sex Rx*. “Some women assume that more days is better, but the science doesn’t show that,” she says.



Pick the right pill for your problem.

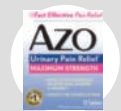
3 Your UTI is killing you. What’s your best bet for quick relief?



A
Aspirin



B
Cranberry extract pills



C
Urinary pain-relief meds



D
Good old-fashioned H₂O

ANSWER: C. UTIs are one of the most common types of bacterial infections, accounting for more than 8 million doctor’s visits each year. So you might expect there to be more OTC options to help a girl out. However, “you almost always need antibiotics to get rid of a UTI,” says Dr. Minkin. Even with antibiotics, it may take a few days to ease that peeing-knives, crotch-on-fire feeling; Dr. Minkin suggests reaching for a urinary analgesic (a pain reliever for your bladder and urethra), such as Azo or Uristat, which can curb some of your discomfort.

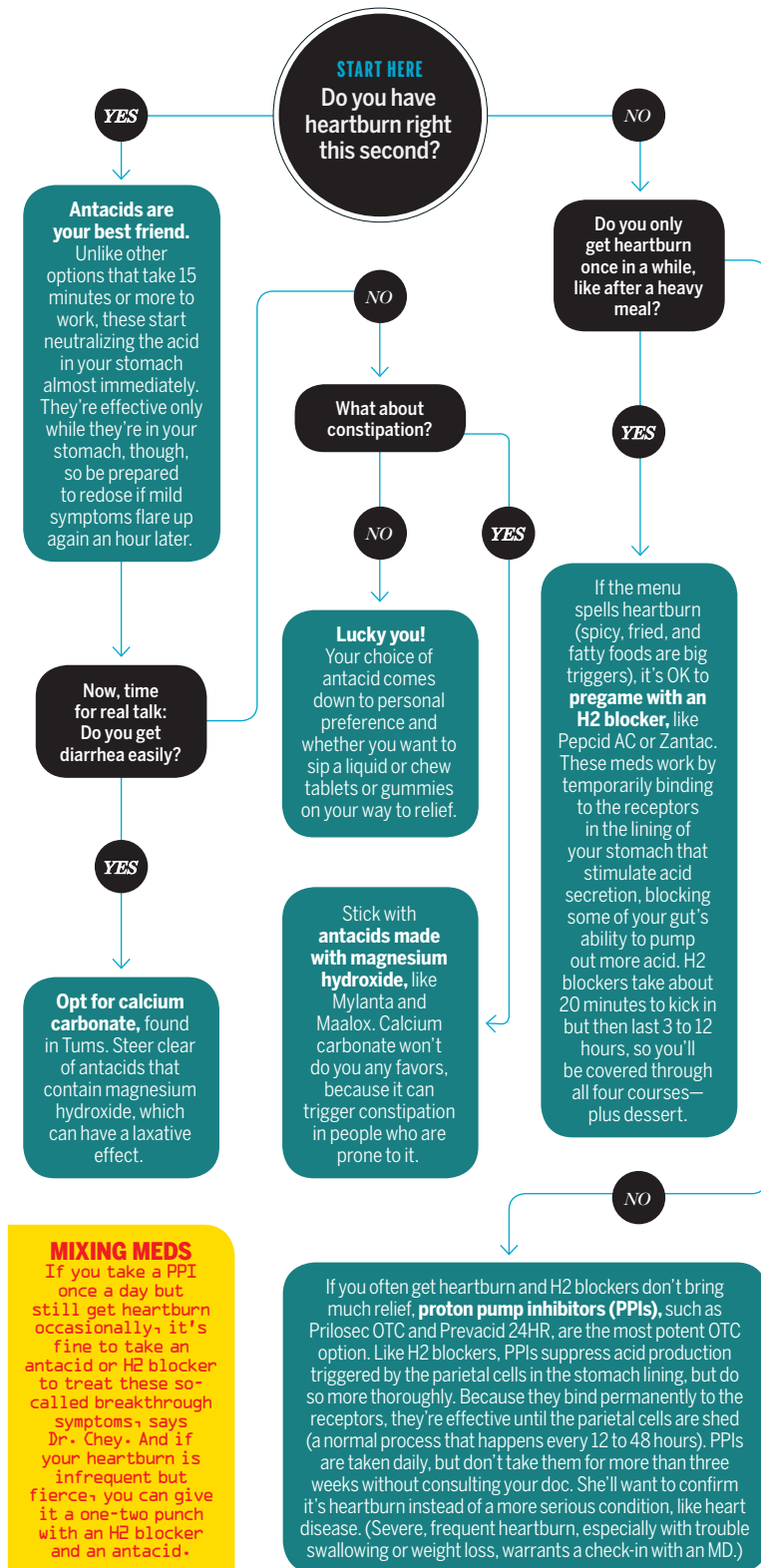
Cranberries won’t cure a UTI but may help prevent one: They contain compounds called tannins that may inhibit bacteria from clinging to your urinary tract so they’re easier to pee out. For patients with recurrent UTIs, Dr. Minkin recommends cranberry extract pills (less sugary than juice) as a preventive measure. And though there’s scant evidence that downing extra water will cure an infection faster, it’s still a good idea to drink up. People tend to restrict their liquids to minimize painful bathroom trips, says Dr. Minkin, but you need to stay hydrated.

4 True or false: You can cut your odds of getting bacterial vaginosis with an OTC treatment.

ANSWER: True. Just like your gut, your vagina is home to all sorts of bacteria, says Dr. Streicher. The “good” kind, called lactobacilli, help keep vaginal pH between 3.5 and 4.5. But if the vagina’s pH is disrupted—say, from semen or menstrual blood—it may become less hospitable to lactobacilli and more welcoming to bad bacteria. The overgrowth often comes with a fishy odor as well as vaginal discharge and irritation. For women who notice a slight smell after sex or their period, using a pH balancing gel, like RepHresh, can make the vagina more acidic and help lactobacilli get the upper hand again. That said, if the bacterial imbalance turns into full-on BV (think: painful urination, itching, more discharge and odor), see your doc for an evaluation and treatment (possibly antibiotics).

Tame the Burn

Don't be intimidated by all the different products and lingo in the digestive health aisle (what the heck is a proton pump, anyway?). William D. Chey, MD, director of the GI Physiology Laboratory at the University of Michigan and creator of the new app MyGiHealth, walks us through the options.



Put Pain in Its Place

Every pain reliever works differently and has its strengths and weaknesses. Here's what to reach for and when. (As with any medication, take only as directed; check with your doc if you have a chronic health condition.)

Ibuprofen

→ An NSAID (nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drug), ibuprofen blocks the production of chemicals that contribute to inflammation and pain. **Best for:** Sports injuries and arthritis aches; headaches and migraines; fever; menstrual cramps.

Acetaminophen

→ Experts don't fully understand how this analgesic works, but it may reduce pain and fever by inhibiting the formation of substances called prostaglandins. **Best for:** Minor aches and pains; headaches; fever.

Naproxen

→ Another NSAID, naproxen is a newer OTC pain med with an effect that may last longer than ibuprofen's (depending on the dose). **Best for:** Sports injuries and arthritis aches; headaches; fever.

Aspirin

→ While it used to be the drugstore default, aspirin isn't commonly recommended for pain relief anymore. **Best for:** Some doctors suggest that people who have had heart attacks or other cardiovascular problems take a low-dose daily aspirin as a way to thin blood. (Talk to your doctor first to see if this is a good move for you.)

Got a Migraine?

Grab a sports drink. "During a migraine, it appears as if blood vessels in the brain dilate," says Andrew D. Hershey, MD, a headache specialist at Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center. Electrolytes in sports drinks help keep water in the blood, so sipping one may help fill the blood vessels, easing dilation and the throbbing that can come from it. Quick energy from the sugar may also help with the pain.

You've Got...Itchy Eyes

▶ When microscopic pollen particles hit your eyes, they trigger an allergic response that can cause serious itchiness. You might also have nonpainful redness or watery discharge.

OTC FIX: Look for antihistamine eye drops, like Zaditor or Alaway. These block the histamine response that causes the itchy inflammation. Steer clear of redness-reducing drops, which won't address the allergic reaction; they're typically vasoconstrictors, which means they shrink blood vessels in the white parts of the eye. Use them over a sustained period of time and you could get a rebound effect, leading to more redness and swelling.

HABIT HELPER: Sunglasses will block pollen from getting near your eyeballs, says Dr. Malde. Once you're home, wash sunscreen and makeup off your face—any sticky substance is a pollen magnet. Keep lashes pollen-free by gently cleaning lids with a damp washcloth; rinse eyes with artificial tears.

You've Got... a Stuffy Nose

▶ Blood vessels in your nasal passages dilate in response to histamine, causing swelling and congestion.

OTC FIX: Look for a corticosteroid spray, such as Flonase or Nasacort, which reduces inflammation in your nasal tissues, relieving congestion, and can make you less sensitive to allergens. (FYI: Get your eyes checked if you use these sprays regularly; extended use has been linked to glaucoma and cataracts.) Nasal decongestant sprays, like Afrin, can also help

Outsmart Your Allergies

Stuffy nose, itchy eyes, sneezing—must be allergy season! Those misery-making symptoms occur when the immune system mistakes a normally harmless substance (like pollen or mold spores) for a threatening one, then releases a cascade of histamine and other chemicals in self-defense. "There are some people who take a daily over-the-counter oral antihistamine and are fine all season," says Baiju Malde, MD, an allergist at Northwestern Medical Group in Chicago. "But others need to target specific symptoms, or they need a combo of medications." Here's how to put your best face forward.



Why suffer? Potent OTC allergy meds are now available.

with that stuffy feeling by shrinking swollen nasal tissues, but they aren't right for regular allergy sufferers. Using them for more than just a few days can trigger rebound congestion, so they're really only appropriate if your congestion crops up very rarely (say, on a weekend trip to a pollen-heavy area).

HABIT HELPER: If you usually shower in the a.m., consider doing so at bedtime, says Dr. Malde. That will help make sure any allergens caught in your hair or on your skin go down the drain—instead of resting on your pillow and making their way to your nose overnight.

You've Got...a Runny Nose or a Cough

▶ Your nose is lined with mucus-producing glands. The histamine response can crank up mucus production, leading to a runny nose or, if the excess snot drips down your throat, a mild cough.

OTC FIX: An oral antihistamine (like Allegra, Claritin, or Zyrtec) can help keep your mucus production in check, says Dr. Malde, as well as prevent sneezing. "If that's enough to ease your symptoms, great," she says. If not, a corticosteroid spray (taken alone or in tandem with an oral antihistamine) is another option. An allergist can help you figure out next steps if OTC meds aren't working.

HABIT HELPER: Nasal steroid sprays are most effective when you use them regularly. Talk to your health-care provider about how often to spritz. "With allergies, anything you can do to prevent a histamine flood, rather than reacting to symptoms after they happen, wins by a mile," says Dr. Malde.

SALVE YOURSELF

For all those summer scrapes (and burns and rashes and itches), keep these creams close at hand.

HYDROCORTISONE CREAM

→ This mild corticosteroid calms inflammation and eases itching, which makes it a go-to for a variety of skin woes, including allergic rashes and poison ivy.

ANTIBIOTIC OINTMENT

→ A quick swipe of bacitracin or Neosporin helps keep infection-causing bacteria at bay so that minor wounds can heal more quickly. (Caution: Some people may have allergic reactions.)

ALOE VERA

→ Too much fun in the sun? Ease sunburn discomfort with a moisturizer that contains aloe vera. (Cool baths and ibuprofen may also help.) If that doesn't work, try hydrocortisone cream.



Aloe is also good for minor burns.