Nonprescription Heartburn Medications for Adults

Nonprescription heartburn medications are over-the-counter drugs that treat symptoms such as indigestion or a burning sensation in the throat or chest.

Commonly Used Nonprescription Heartburn Medications

- **Antacids**: chewable tablets or liquids that contain aluminum hydroxide, magnesium hydroxide, calcium carbonate, sodium bicarbonate, or bismuth subsalicylate. Antacids frequently contain a combination of aluminum and magnesium. Antacids can be helpful for people with occasional symptoms of heartburn. These drugs neutralize acid in the stomach within seconds and continue to work for about 2 hours. Antacids should be taken at the onset of heartburn symptoms. Common side effects of antacids include nausea, vomiting, stomach cramps, constipation, diarrhea, and intestinal gas.

- **Histamine 2 (H₂) blockers**: tablets, liquids, or capsules that contain cimetidine, famotidine, or nizatidine. Nonprescription H₂ blockers can be taken when heartburn symptoms begin or 30 minutes before eating food or drinking beverages that typically cause heartburn. These drugs decrease stomach acid production within 1 to 3 hours and work for 4 to 12 hours. Nonprescription H₂ blockers should be taken as “on-demand” therapy for heartburn and are not intended to be taken for more than 14 days in a row. Side effects of H₂ blockers are rare and include headache, diarrhea, dizziness, rash, and male breast enlargement.

- **Proton pump inhibitors (PPIs)**: tablets, capsules, or dissolving tablets that contain esomeprazole, lansoprazole, or omeprazole. Nonprescription PPIs can treat heartburn that occurs 2 or more days per week. These drugs decrease the amount of acid produced in the stomach. Nonprescription PPIs should be taken once daily 30-60 minutes before meals, and for 4 to 12 hours. Nonprescription PPIs should be taken as “on-demand” therapy for heartburn and are not intended to be taken for more than 14 days in a row. Side effects of PPIs are rare and include headache, diarrhea, dizziness, rash, and male breast enlargement.

Tips for Taking Nonprescription Heartburn Medications

- Talk with your doctor or pharmacist about which nonprescription heartburn medications are safe to use if you take prescription medications, are pregnant, or have kidney or liver disease.
- Read the package label for recommended dosing, and do not take the medication at higher doses or for longer periods of time than recommended.
- Some nonprescription heartburn medications contain a combination of an H₂ blocker or PPI with an antacid. Carefully review the package labeling to make sure the product is safe for you.

When to Seek Additional Medical Care

- Seek emergency care if you have heartburn with severe chest pain, dizziness, lightheadedness, or sweating.
- Stop using nonprescription heartburn medications and talk to your doctor if you develop nausea or vomiting, bloody or black stools, pain or difficulty swallowing food, or unexplained weight loss.
- Talk with a clinician or pharmacist about which heartburn medications are safe to use if you take prescription medications, are pregnant, or have kidney or liver disease.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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