

Diphenhydramine

Benadryl • check the active ingredient

An antihistamine that can cause strong sleepiness and drying effects. The reason you take it matters.

From Jeffrey Panko, PMHNP-BC's education collection ·

Draft for review · Clinical content has not been revalidated for this website.

DO NOT DOUBLE UP PRODUCTS

ALLERGY LIMITS ARE NOT SLEEP DOSES

This adult guide does not give a child's dose. Never use diphenhydramine to make a child sleepy.

What it is used for

Some products relieve sneezing, runny nose and itchy, watery eyes. Others are labeled for occasional trouble sleeping, not ongoing insomnia.

Clinicians may also use it for certain medicine-related muscle spasms. It is not a treatment for every kind of restlessness or abnormal movement.

How it works

It blocks histamine signals involved in allergy. In the brain, this can make you sleepy and slow your reactions.

It also blocks some acetylcholine signals. That can cause dry mouth, constipation, blurry vision, trouble urinating or confusion.

What to expect over time

AFTER A DOSE

Relief and drowsiness can appear the same day.

NEXT MORNING

Sleepiness or slowed reactions can linger.

IF SLEEP STAYS POOR

More than two weeks needs an assessment, not a higher dose.

Taking your medication

Use your exact package or prescription directions. Allergy and sleep products have different dose limits. Never use the allergy maximum as a sleep dose.

Do not combine it with another diphenhydramine product, including a skin cream. Check cold, allergy and PM products before taking them.

Avoid alcohol. Do not drive or use machinery when sleepy, dizzy or slowed. Do not add another sleep medicine on your own.

When to get help

Call 911: trouble breathing, severe throat swelling, collapse, a seizure or inability to wake. For anaphylaxis, use prescribed epinephrine; do not rely on Benadryl.

Get urgent help: severe confusion, hallucinations, a racing/irregular heartbeat, very hot dry skin, severe eye pain or inability to urinate.

Possible overdose? Call Poison Control now, 1-800-222-1222, even without symptoms. Do not make yourself vomit; call 911 for severe symptoms.

Early side effects

Sleepiness, dizziness, poor balance, dry mouth, blurred vision, nausea and constipation can occur. Some people become restless or excited instead, especially children.

Other effects to discuss

Feeling less sleepy after repeated use does not mean the medicine is harmless. Memory, balance, bowel and bladder problems may remain. Tell your team if you are taking it nightly or needing more.

What to keep track of

Keep track of why you take it, each dose and any morning grogginess, falls or bowel/bladder changes. Healthy adults using it briefly usually do not need blood tests. Persistent symptoms deserve a new plan rather than more medicine.

Before you start

Ask your clinician or pharmacist first about glaucoma, urinary problems, severe constipation, breathing or heart disease, memory problems, falls, pregnancy or nursing. Older adults generally need a safer alternative for routine use. Pregnancy and breastfeeding advice depends on dose, duration and product; discuss repeated use, and report infant unusual sleepiness, irritability or poor feeding.

Medicines & interactions

Alcohol and other sedatives

Alcohol, opioids, benzodiazepines, cannabis and sleep medicines can add to impairment. Ask before combining; do not assume an OTC medicine is safe with prescriptions.

Other drying medicines

Some bladder medicines, older antidepressants and medicines for movement symptoms can add constipation, urinary retention and confusion.

MAOIs and prescription changes

MAOI antidepressants can intensify drying effects. Have your pharmacist review the full list before adding diphenhydramine or changing other medicines.

Cold, allergy and PM products

The same ingredient may appear under different names. Check skin products too. Combination products may add pain relievers or cough medicines you do not need.

Everyday tips

Ask about a less-sedating option for regular allergies.

For ongoing insomnia, ask about CBT-I sleep treatment.

Use sugar-free gum for dry mouth if appropriate.

Keep a clear path at night and rise carefully.

Your questions, answered

What if I miss a dose?

If you use it only as needed, there is no dose to catch up. For a prescribed schedule, follow your team's missed-dose advice. Never double a dose.

Can I take more if I cannot sleep?

No. Follow the sleep product's limit and do not add doses during the night. Extra doses can cause dangerous heart, brain and breathing problems.

Does non-habit-forming mean safe nightly?

No. Tolerance, unwanted effects and misuse can still occur. Occasional use usually needs no taper, but discuss how to stop regular or high-dose use safely.

What if my muscles or eyes suddenly spasm?

Get urgent medical assessment, especially after a new medicine. Trouble speaking, swallowing or breathing is an emergency. Do not keep self-dosing for an unexplained movement problem.

Storage & safety

Keep in the original container at room temperature, protected from heat, moisture and light, locked away from children and pets. Do not share medicines. Ask your pharmacist about take-back disposal.

A final reminder

Follow your own prescribed plan.

About this information

For general information only; not a substitute for individualized medical advice. This sheet does not cover every risk or interaction. Ask your prescriber or pharmacist before changing how you take this medication.

Sources

1. <https://dailymed.nlm.nih.gov/dailymed/fda/fdaDrugXsl.cfm?setid=f4ff84b3-bb0c-4900-8ba4-6d1b90394782&type=display>
 2. <https://medlineplus.gov/druginfo/meds/a682539.html>
 3. <https://mothertobaby.org/fact-sheets/diphenhydramine-pregnancy/>
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Educational inclusion does not mean this medication or its indications are treated at this practice. Review the guide for your exact product with your prescriber or pharmacist.

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