

Health products you don't need

From cold remedies to painkillers, **Joanna Pearl** names the widely available medicines and supplements that aren't all they're cracked up to be

AT A GLANCE

- ▶ The over-the-counter health products and medicines that aren't proven to work
- ▶ What cheaper alternatives you can buy
- ▶ The questions you should ask before parting with your cash

You'd be forgiven for assuming that any product on the shelves of your local pharmacy would be worthy of a place in your shopping basket. But our research has revealed a raft of products from well-known brands that we think aren't worth your money.

In some cases, such as Benylin Ticky Cough and Chesty Cough medicines, it's because there is a lack of evidence that they work. In others, such as painkillers Combogesic and Nuromol, it's because they're expensive combination formulations of commonly available painkillers.

We also uncovered examples of the same product – day and night cold and flu capsules – branded in 10 different ways, with a staggering 374% difference in price (95p for Wilko's own brand, compared with £4.50 from Sudafed). Our experts also concluded there is insufficient evidence that the active decongestant ingredient in them (phenylephrine) works. It would be cheaper to take standard paracetamol washed down with a cup of coffee (for the caffeine).

And then there are products – such as three nose sprays Otrivine makes that are individually marketed for sinusitis, allergy relief and nasal congestion – that are exactly the same. This type of rebranding is allowed by

the regulator, but we think that it's fundamentally misleading for anyone who doesn't read the small print on the back of the box.

We used an expert panel to review manufacturers' evidence behind all the products we assessed – for more on how we did our research, see p25.

Find the best products

Follow these tips when scrutinising over-the-counter remedies:

- Ask the pharmacist to explain the risks and benefits of products, or to suggest alternatives.
- Be wary of unspecific, meaningless claims such as 'stay younger for longer' (Seven Seas Perfect7 Woman).
- Check on the packaging what the key active ingredients are, and if other products do the same for a cheaper price. This also means you won't buy multiple products that are the same.
- Look for cheaper versions of the same medicine. Each has a marketing authorisation ('product licence' or 'PL' number. If this is the same on two products, they are the same medicine.
- Double-check the full ingredients list, especially if you're on a restricted diet, so you're aware of extras such as salt and sugar in medicines. If it's not stated (as with the salt we uncovered in Jointace Fizz) ask the customer services of the company or your pharmacist.

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1 Otrivine nasal sprays

Price: Around £3.50 for 10ml spray
Otrivine sells three sprays for sufferers of different ailments: Otrivine Allergy Relief 0.1%, Otrivine Adult Measured Dose Sinusitis and Otrivine Adult Metered Dose 0.1%.

Expert verdict: Look closely at the small print on the back, and you'll realise all three are the same. The manufacturer says they're marketed for different conditions to help you select 'the product most suited to your needs' (and the regulator says it's in line with the product's licensing) but we think this is misleading and you could waste money buying all three.

2 Nuromol & Combogesic^b

Price: a £6.99 for 24 b £3.99 for 16
Both these painkillers contain 500mg of paracetamol combined with a dose of ibuprofen (150mg in Combogesic and 200mg in Nuromol).

Expert verdict: You pay a high price for the convenience of a two-in-one product. Combogesic tablets cost 25p each and Nuromol 29p. A far cheaper way to get the same or similar benefits would be to buy generic unbranded versions of the painkilling ingredients. Generic paracetamol costs as little as 1.2p per 500mg tablet, and ibuprofen 1.6p per 200mg tablet. That's 2.8p for an equivalent dose.

3 Sudafed Mucus Relief/ Congestion & Headache Relief Day & Night capsules

Price: £4.50

The packaging says: 'Helps relieve the symptoms of colds and flu, including stuffy noses, headaches, sore throats, fever, aches and pains.'

Expert verdict: The capsules contain paracetamol, phenylephrine (a decongestant) and (in the day capsules) caffeine. But there isn't enough evidence that oral phenylephrine is more effective as a decongestant than a placebo. You could expect similar results by taking generic paracetamol with a coffee.

We're concerned too that retailers sell the capsules – marketed under brands, including Benylin and own brands – at prices from 95p at Wilko to £4.50 from Sudafed (see right).

Sudafed says that the regulator assesses and approves ingredients, indications and packaging for

medicines, including that they're clinically proven and effective, before they can be sold.

4 Benylin chesty coughs and tickly coughs medicines

Price: Around £4.50 for 150ml

Benylin Ticky Coughs & Sore Throat Non-drowsy cough syrup contains glycerol, but our experts found no published research on the efficacy of glycerol as an acute cough treatment. There is also no high-quality evidence that the medicine can soothe the tickly sensation that makes you want to cough, as it claims.

Plus it's 77% sugar – 1.5 teaspoons per 10ml dose. The maximum four daily doses would exceed your 30g recommended daily sugar limit.

Benylin Chesty Coughs Non-drowsy, claims it 'works deep down to loosen phlegm, clear bronchial congestion, and make your cough more productive'. Our experts concluded that these claims aren't justified by the evidence on the active ingredients.

Expert verdict: Benylin said that these products are clinically proven and offer effective symptom relief, but our experts said there's no good evidence cough medicines work.

We put this to the regulator (the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency). It said: 'Prior to placing a medicinal product on the market, all manufacturers are required to submit evidence of acceptable quality, safe use and efficacy in the proposed indications.' This was also reiterated by Benylin. >



Same pills, different prices

Prices correct as we went to press

EXPERT VIEW

THE TRUTH ABOUT OVER-THE-COUNTER MEDICINES



Joanna Pearl,
Which? principal health researcher

Before medicines are approved for use, they go through clinical trials and are licensed. Before granting a licence, the regulator asks for evidence of acceptable quality, safe use and efficacy for the conditions it claims to treat. Our experts reviewed clinical studies or literature for some over-the-counter products and found a lack of evidence that they work.

The Cochrane review of cough medicines says that the lack of evidence of effectiveness brings into question how they can continue to be promoted using language that implies that their effectiveness isn't in doubt.

Lack of transparency

In some cases, the companies declined to show us the evidence that their product worked. They said, through a spokesperson or the manufacturers' trade body, the Proprietary Association of Great Britain (PAGB), that the regulator had licensed the medicine, and therefore it is safe and effective.

Why won't the firms show us their evidence? The PAGB says it's because they don't want to give competitors 'commercially sensitive' data. Manufacturers have invested in research and new product development, and it's rare for over-the-counter medicines to have patent protection once launched. But other firms have shared data with us. The European Medicines Agency encourages this for pharmaceutical drugs and routinely publishes the clinical data submitted by companies.

All firms should be equally transparent, so we can see if their medicines really are value for money.

5 Otex^a and Earex Advance^b ear drops

Price: a Around £5 for 8ml; b Around £4 for 15ml

Both products are designed to help remove hardened ear wax.

Expert verdict: Hydrogen peroxide-based ear drops like these do work, (our experts reviewed a trial sent by Otex; Earex didn't provide specific evidence). But wider evidence shows it's likely that cheaper alternatives



including saline, water and olive or almond oil would work as well.

Using any drops appears to be better than no treatment, but it is uncertain if one type is any better than another.

Otex believes that urea hydrogen peroxide breaks up hardened ear wax in a way neither water nor saline do. Earex told us that NICE (the National Institute for Healthcare and Care Excellence) recommends this treatment for ear wax.

6 Centrum Advance 50+

Price: Around £4.50 for 30 tablets
The website says: 'Age may just be a number but it can impact your health needs.' It claims to have adjusted levels of key nutrients to offer specific nutritional support to adults over 50.

Expert verdict: People who eat a healthy balanced diet shouldn't need multivitamins. Even if you're advised to take vitamin D or K for bone health, this wouldn't be as useful or cheap as a generic multivitamin supplement because of the low doses of key ingredients. Centrum costs about 15p per tablet, significantly more than a Superdrug own-brand multivitamin (6.6p per tablet) or one from Boots costing 3p per tablet.

Centrum said the tablets supplement a healthy diet and that its health and nutrition claims comply with the European Food Safety Authority.

7 Optrex Multi Action Eye Wash

Price: From £6 for 300ml (£20 per litre)
This eye wash claims to wash, soothe and cleanse tired, irritated and uncomfortable eyes.

Expert verdict: This eye wash would indeed wash the eye but the preservative used (in particular the benzalkonium chloride) can irritate some eyes. Sterile saline solution (from £5.50 a litre or £2 for 360ml) or preservative-free sterile water would be cheaper. The Optrex has an eye bath, but you can buy one separately and reuse it if kept sterile.

Optrex told us via the Proprietary Association of Great Britain (a trade body) that UK over-the-counter medicines are rigorously assessed for safety and efficacy before sale.

8 Seven Seas Perfect7 Woman

Price: From £7.50 to £10.50 for 30
'Our experts identified seven key needs for women and developed those into Perfect7 Woman,' claims Seven Seas.

Expert verdict: The key ingredients here aren't needed by women who eat a balanced diet and aren't deficient in zinc (skin and nails) or biotin (hair). A cheaper and just as useful alternative (if recommended above a healthy diet) would be a standard multivitamin and mineral supplement with a separate fish oil capsule if you need long-chain omega 3 fats (eg if you don't eat enough

Its claims are unspecific, for example cartilage and bone health are important for long-term wellbeing

oily fish). Seven Seas told us that its authorised nutrition and health claims have been scientifically evaluated by the European Food Safety Authority.

9 Corsodyl Ultra Clean Daily Fluoride Toothpaste

Price: Around £4 for 75ml (£5.33 per 100ml)

The packaging claims this is 'four times more effective at removing the main cause of bleeding gums' than a regular toothpaste.

Expert verdict: This toothpaste has a high level of sodium bicarbonate (or baking soda) in it (67%), and there is evidence that toothpastes containing this are better than regular fluoride toothpastes at cleaning tooth surfaces, controlling plaque and reducing gum inflammation, as Corsodyl claims.

But until well-run studies pit Corsodyl against other toothpastes with slightly lower baking-soda concentrations, there is no evidence that this toothpaste is better than other baking-soda-containing toothpastes such as Arm & Hammer, which costs £3.33 per 100ml.

10 Vitabiotics Jointace Fizz

Price: £8.49 for 20 tablets

The name suggests it's for those concerned about joints and includes unspecific claims such as 'cartilage and bone health are important for long-term wellbeing'. Key ingredients include glucosamine and chondroitin.

Viabiotics says its product 'provides an effective health maintenance level' of glucosamine sulphate and complies with applicable regulations.

Expert verdict: Glucosamine is an important part of bone cartilage, but there's a lack of substantiated evidence to support claims that supplements with it can offer the same support.

Even if chondroitin works (trials are poor quality), it would need a much higher dose than these tablets have. Also the product doesn't list how much sodium it contains, but we found that taking two a day is equivalent to a sixth of your 6g recommended salt intake.

Our research

In February, we surveyed 1,280 Which? members about the over-the-counter medicines they'd bought in the past year. We used their responses and the details of popular and widely marketed products to select the ones to review.

We then asked the manufacturers for clinical evidence that their medicines are effective, and got an expert panel to review this or (where the manufacturer declined to disclose its private research) publicly available evidence. The panel gave their view on whether you should buy them, for reasons including the evidence they work and possible cheaper choices.

Our experts were a GP, an academic pharmacist, an optometrist, toothpaste experts and a dietitian. At least two examined the evidence for each product.



THE BOTTOM LINE

It's not always easy to decide which over-the-counter medicines and products such as cough medicine, eye wash and cold and flu remedies are worth your cash. Our research has found many cases where you could buy far cheaper alternatives that work just as well. We want companies to be more open in showing us their evidence, but in the meantime be sure to ask the pharmacist any questions about the products, and check the key active ingredients to see if you can find a cheaper alternative.

FIND OUT MORE

What do you think?
Tell us at which.co.uk/meds

Recent articles in Which?
'The truth about painkillers', January 2016, p26-29

Other useful resources
Looking further at the evidence behind medicines: askforevidence.org > help by subject > health & medicine