

Why Benadryl Is an Outdated and Unsafe Allergy Treatment

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STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- › Benadryl's active ingredient, diphenhydramine, is now considered outdated and unsafe, with researchers urging that it be removed from over-the-counter use
- › The drug causes strong sedation, impaired memory, and slower reaction times, with studies showing it affects driving performance more than alcohol
- › Older adults face lingering grogginess for up to 18 hours, while children risk unpredictable reactions, including agitation, coma, or heart problems if overdosed
- › Other countries have already restricted access, and medical authorities warn against its use in children, highlighting safer alternatives and lifestyle strategies
- › Natural approaches like vitamin C, quercetin, whole foods, restorative sleep, and stress management help balance histamine and reduce allergy symptoms without dangerous side effects

Benadryl has been a household name for decades, often treated as harmless relief for allergies, coughs, colds, or a restless night. Yet its story is far more complicated. Introduced in the 1940s, it was the first antihistamine of its kind, and for years it was considered a breakthrough. Over time, though, its flaws became harder to ignore as safer and more effective alternatives entered the market.

What makes this important for you is not just history, but the ongoing assumption that something familiar is safe. Many people keep Benadryl in their medicine cabinet because it's what they grew up with. Few stop to question whether the drug itself has

kept pace with modern science or whether newer options could offer the same relief without the risks.

This article takes a closer look at that question. You'll learn what researchers uncovered about Benadryl's safety profile, why experts now argue it does more harm than good, and what steps you can take to manage allergies and histamine reactions without turning to a drug that has overstayed its welcome.

Benadryl Is No Longer Worth the Risk

Published in the World Allergy Organization Journal, the analysis examined diphenhydramine's long-standing role as the first U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA)-approved antihistamine in 1946 and concluded that its risks now outweigh its usefulness.¹ The authors emphasized that diphenhydramine has reached the end of its medical life cycle, with safer and equally effective alternatives now available.

- **Millions of people still use it despite better options** – More than 1.5 million prescriptions for diphenhydramine are written every year in the U.S., with far higher numbers of over-the-counter purchases. Surveys show that 62% of adults and 51% of children with seasonal allergies are treated with over-the-counter antihistamines, often Benadryl. Many parents report using it because they grew up with it themselves, assuming it's still safe.
- **The drug causes strong sedation and cognitive impairment** – Unlike newer antihistamines, diphenhydramine easily crosses your **blood-brain barrier**, meaning it directly affects brain function. This results in drowsiness, slower reaction times, memory issues, and poor concentration.

In fact, research cited in the paper found that diphenhydramine had a greater negative effect on driving than alcohol – a shocking finding for a drug sold in nearly every pharmacy.² The European Union has classified it as "do not drive" due to its sedative power.

- **The effects last far longer in certain groups** — The paper reported that while children metabolize the drug quickly (with a half-life of around four hours), older adults retain it for much longer, with half-lives of up to 18 hours. That means grogginess and poor alertness carry into the following day, which explains why older users are at higher risk for falls, confusion, and accidents. For students, lingering drowsiness translates into poor academic performance and reduced focus in school.
- **Adverse effects stretch beyond drowsiness** — Diphenhydramine's "**anticholinergic**" **effects** interfere with the neurotransmitter acetylcholine, which is important for memory, learning, digestion, and muscle movement. This leads to constipation, urinary retention, dry eyes, and dry mouth.

More concerning is the connection between long-term use of first-generation antihistamines like diphenhydramine and **dementia**. Repeated exposure appears to worsen cognitive decline, making its use especially risky for older adults.

- **Children are vulnerable to unpredictable reactions** — The paper highlighted paradoxical effects in children, meaning they often become hyperactive, agitated, or confused instead of sedated. When overdosed, they swing to the opposite extreme — significant sedation, coma, or even cardiac arrhythmias.

Most accidental poisonings with diphenhydramine occur in toddlers aged 2 to 4, and ingestion often requires hospitalization or critical care. Some cases have been fatal, underscoring how dangerous this common medicine is when left within a child's reach.

Medical Authorities Worldwide Are Restricting Diphenhydramine's Use

Germany, Sweden, and the Netherlands have already limited diphenhydramine to prescription-only status.³ In the U.S., the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) prohibits pilots from using sedating antihistamines, while allowing non-sedating versions.

Pediatric guidelines in the U.S., Canada, and the U.K. recommend against giving diphenhydramine-containing products to young children, recognizing its risks. The paper strongly recommends moving Benadryl "behind the counter" so pharmacists can guide patients toward safer options.

- **The drug is prone to misuse and abuse** – Researchers pointed out that diphenhydramine has become popular on social media for dangerous "challenges," with teens intentionally taking excessive doses.

The FDA has issued warnings after reports of seizures, coma, heart problems, and deaths linked to this misuse. Beyond that, diphenhydramine is often mixed into over-the-counter sleep aids, cough syrups, and cold medicines, creating even more opportunities for misuse.

- **Diphenhydramine's dangers come from two main mechanisms** – This includes its ability to cross the blood-brain barrier and its anticholinergic activity. Crossing into the brain leads to sedation, psychomotor impairment, and memory problems. Blocking acetylcholine worsens these effects while also interfering with digestion, urinary flow, and vision. Together, these mechanisms explain why the drug is not only sedating but harmful to long-term brain health.
- **Emergency care has already shifted away from diphenhydramine** – Until 2019, hospitals relied on intravenous diphenhydramine for severe allergic reactions, but now IV cetirizine is approved and preferred. It provides the same relief with fewer side effects, shorter emergency room stays, and less sedation. This transition highlights how even in acute care, where speed is key, doctors are abandoning diphenhydramine in favor of safer alternatives.
- **If you use Benadryl for allergies, colds, or sleep, you're exposing yourself to unnecessary risks** – These include grogginess, memory problems, reduced alertness, and even long-term cognitive decline. Safer alternatives exist and making the switch protects your brain, your safety, and your family's well-being.

How to Protect Yourself from the Risks of Benadryl

If you've been relying on Benadryl for allergies, sleep, or coughs, you're not alone. Millions of people keep it in their medicine cabinet without realizing how unsafe it is. But instead of masking the problem with a drug that leaves you groggy and at higher risk for accidents, you can take steps that address the root causes and build lasting resilience.

- 1. Start with an elimination diet to uncover triggers** – If you're struggling with chronic allergies, your first step is figuring out what foods or environmental factors are setting off your immune system. By removing common triggers for a short period and reintroducing them one at a time, you can see what sparks your symptoms.

The key is not complete avoidance forever – that only increases your risk of nutrient deficiencies. Instead, your goal is awareness, so you understand which foods to limit, which ones you tolerate well, and how to build a balanced diet that strengthens your immune system instead of fighting against it.

- 2. Use vitamin C to lower histamine naturally** – You might not realize that something as simple as **vitamin C** helps your body keep histamine in check. Studies show that just 300 to 500 milligrams (mg) of vitamin C a day enhances histamine degradation,⁴ while 2,000 mg daily lowers plasma histamine levels by about 40% within two weeks.⁵

That means fewer allergy symptoms without the brain fog Benadryl causes. The easiest way to get more vitamin C is through your plate – red peppers, citrus fruits, and kiwi are excellent choices. If your diet is lacking, a supplement at the right dose helps give you steady relief.

- 3. Lean on quercetin for long-term antihistamine support** – **Quercetin** is a plant compound with powerful anti-allergy activity. It works by stabilizing the cells that release histamine, so your body doesn't flood with it in the first place. Onions (especially the skins), apples, and berries are all rich in quercetin.

If you want a stronger effect, consider a supplemental dose of 500 mg to 1,000 mg, taken two to four times daily. If eating onion skins doesn't sound appealing, making a broth from them is an easy workaround. Over time, this gives you steadier control of your allergy response without the rollercoaster sedation that comes with Benadryl.

- 4. Prioritize whole foods over processed snacks** – Most allergy-prone people do not realize that processed food drives histamine issues. Packaged meals, boxed snacks, and fast food are loaded with additives that stress your system and reduce your resilience. Shifting toward fresh, whole foods – fruits, vegetables, grass fed beef, and root vegetables – gives your body the nutrients it needs to restore balance.

For instance, [kaempferol](#) – a potent anti-allergic flavonoid – is abundant in leafy green veggies, such as broccoli, spinach, and cabbage. This change doesn't just help allergies; it also supports your energy, mood, and long-term health in ways no over-the-counter pill ever will.

- 5. Support your body with natural histamine balance strategies** – Instead of relying on medications, you can strengthen your body's own ability to manage histamine. While not a substitute for medical treatment in the case of severe allergies, simple daily habits make a big difference.

Focus on getting enough restorative sleep, since poor sleep increases inflammation and worsens allergy symptoms. Add regular movement – whether that's walking, stretching, or gentle exercise – to help regulate immune function.

Make time for stress management, because high stress raises histamine release and intensifies allergic reactions. Even mindful practices like deep breathing or spending time outdoors in fresh air help calm your system. By making these lifestyle shifts, you create a foundation that keeps histamine under control naturally and reduces your reliance on drugs altogether.

FAQs About Benadryl

Q: Why is Benadryl considered unsafe today?

A: Benadryl, which contains diphenhydramine, was introduced in the 1940s but is now seen as outdated and risky. Research shows it causes strong sedation, confusion, memory issues, and even higher accident risk than alcohol. Long-term use is linked to dementia and other health problems, making it a poor choice compared to safer modern options.

Q: What makes diphenhydramine more dangerous for older adults and children?

A: Older adults metabolize the drug slowly, leaving them groggy and cognitively impaired for up to 18 hours. This raises their risk of falls, accidents, and memory decline. Children often react unpredictably, becoming hyperactive or agitated instead of sleepy. In overdose situations, toddlers face extreme sedation, coma, or even life-threatening heart problems.

Q: Are other countries limiting Benadryl's availability?

A: Yes. Germany, Sweden, and the Netherlands have already restricted diphenhydramine to prescription-only status. In the U.S., agencies such as the FAA ban pilots from using sedating antihistamines, while pediatric guidelines in the U.S., Canada, and the U.K. advise against giving Benadryl products to young children.

Q: What natural remedies help manage histamine without using Benadryl?

A: You can lower histamine naturally by using vitamin C, which reduces histamine levels in your blood, and quercetin, which stabilizes the cells that release histamine. Whole foods rich in these compounds – such as red peppers, citrus fruits, onions, and berries – support your immune system and reduce allergy symptoms without sedating you.

Q: What lifestyle steps reduce allergy symptoms long-term?

A: Focusing on root causes makes the biggest difference. An elimination diet helps identify triggers without risking nutrient deficiencies. Prioritizing whole foods over processed snacks, getting restorative sleep, moving daily, and managing stress all support histamine balance. These changes strengthen your body's resilience, keeping symptoms under control naturally and safely.

Sources and References

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- ⁴ [Nutrients. 2021 Sep 15;13\(9\):3207](#)
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