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.

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 Tickly 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 formulations – that are exactly the same.

\[\text{\textbf{Find the best products}}\]

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

- Ask the pharmacist to explain the risks and benefits of products, or suggest alternatives.
- Be wary of un Specific, meaningless claims such as ‘stay younger for longer’ (Seven Seas Perfect 7 Woman) and 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 sell 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®**

**Price:** £5.99 for 24 to £3.99 to £16

Both these painkillers contain 500mg of paracetamol combined with a dose of dihydrocodeine (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 23p 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 dihydrocodeine 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. 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 said 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 Tickly Cough & 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, safety and efficacy in the proposed indications.’

This was also reiterated by Benylin.

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**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
Lack of transparency

In recent years, the companies have declined to show us the evidence that their product worked. They did, through spokespeople or the manufacturers’ trade body, the Proprietary Association of Great Britain (PAGB), that the regulator had licensed the medicines, 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 pharmaceuticals and collaborates and routinely publishes the clinical data submitted by companies.

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