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## Natural Alternatives: Ten Most Prescribed Drugs

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(Prevention.com) -- Have we become over-medicated? Let's look at the numbers: Americans spent more than \$300 billion on [prescription drugs](#) last year; nearly half of all adults have taken at least one prescription drug in the last month; nearly a third regularly use two or more; and women are more likely than men to use prescription drugs, according to the CDC.

Drugs can undoubtedly save lives, but our penchant for prescriptions can sometimes mean treating or masking symptoms—without fixing the root cause of the health issue.

“There are [natural therapies](#) available that are much safer, often more effective, and cost much less,” says Jacob Teitelbaum, MD, author of the book *Real Cause, Real Cure* (Rodale, 2011). “Of course, you should never start, change, or stop taking medications without first talking to your doctor.”

Check out the top 10 most prescribed drugs in the United States, then read on for our experts' suggestions on the best natural alternatives to treat—and prevent—illness.

### 1. For Pain

#### Hydrocodone/ acetaminophen, such as Vicodin

**Key Statistics:** Doctors wrote more than 131 million prescriptions for pain meds last year, for everything from dental surgeries to sports injuries.

**Natural Remedy:** Try Some Hands-On Help. [Pain](#) can be debilitating, sure, but pain meds can be addictive—and ingredients such as acetaminophen may also damage your liver in the long term. Rather than relying on a pill that masks your aches, try to tackle the trigger by seeing a professional with a healing touch. “Drugs will never be the answer to solving pain because pills treat only the symptoms and not the underlying cause,” says Sungwon D. Yoo, D.C., M.S.A.O.M., L.Ac, a chiropractor and acupuncturist who uses Traditional Chinese Medicine in his private practice, Healing Point, in Fayetteville, NY. “Pain can be caused by an interference in our body's nervous system, so manipulating the body's main nervous system channel to the brain—the spine—can help remedy aches.” Science supports the claims: People with lower back pain who received just four chiropractic treatment sessions in two weeks showed greater improvement in disability and pain compared to those receiving usual care, according to the *Archives of Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation*. [Use Acupuncture to Treat Health Problems](#)

### 2. For High Cholesterol

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## Statins, such as simvastatin (Zocor) or atorvastatin (Lipitor)



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**Key Statistics:** [Statins](#) prevent your liver from making cholesterol by blocking a necessary enzyme. Pharmacies dole out more than 45 million prescriptions a year for Lipitor alone.

**Natural Remedy:** Change Your Diet. Certain foods—such as oats, garlic, olive oil, and red wine—can help reduce inflammation in your body and have been proven to lower “bad” LDL cholesterol or raise “good” HDL cholesterol naturally. The secret to garlic’s heart-protecting powers is an amino acid called allicin, which is released when garlic is crushed. Allicin protects the heart by keeping cholesterol from sticking to artery walls. And studies show that red wine may raise HDL, or “good” cholesterol, and thin blood to keep artery-blocking clots from forming. In fact, moderate drinking may slash your risk of heart disease by up to 40 percent, according to the Harvard School of Public Health. Here is another tasty heart-smart move: Eating a small square of dark chocolate three to four times a week may be 25 times as effective as taking statins for preventing heart disease, says Dr. Teitelbaum.

[Lower Cholesterol By Eating](#)

### 3. For High Blood Pressure

#### Lisinopril (Zestril) or amlodipine besylate (Norvasc)

**Key Statistics:** The number of blood pressure prescriptions filled every year tops 144 million.

**Natural Remedy:** Up Your Intake of These Supplements. Prescription meds can play an important role in lowering blood pressure, but with the help of your doctor and the right supplements, you may be able to cut back—or eventually stop taking—prescription drugs. “In my experience, the best approach is to use medications to bring your blood pressure under control initially, and then add natural therapies that can help you wean off your prescription,” says Dr. Teitelbaum. Increasing your potassium (500 mg a day—present in a banana or a cup of tomato juice or coconut water) and magnesium (200 mg a day) are especially effective at lowering blood pressure in most people. If you have especially high blood pressure, talk to your doctor about also taking 200 milligrams a day of Coenzyme Q10, an antioxidant that might help lower BP by dilating blood vessels. “Coenzyme Q10 deficiency is especially common in people taking cholesterol-lowering medications, and I have seen it lower blood pressure as much as 30 to 40 points in some severe cases,” says Dr. Teitelbaum. He suggests using the Enzymatic Therapy or Integrative Therapeutics brands for the highest quality and most effectiveness. [13 Ways to Lower BP Naturally](#)

### 4. For Hypothyroidism

#### Levothyroxine sodium (Synthroid)

**Key Statistics:** Hypothyroidism is most common in women over age 50. In fact, as much as 10% of women over 50 will have at least mild hypothyroidism. More than 70 million prescriptions are given for Synthroid annually.

**Natural Remedy:** Check for Mineral Deficiencies. Low thyroid problems might happen because the thyroid is being attacked by your own immune system, but it can also occur from mineral deficiencies such as iodine, iron, or selenium. Talk to your doctor about whether taking mineral supplements *before* going on meds might be for you, or whether natural thyroid glandular supplements, such as BMR Complex by Integrative Therapeutics, might be helpful. “The thyroid glandular [supplement] supplies the raw materials needed to optimize thyroid function, so taking one or two capsules three times daily between meals could start the process of kicking your thyroid back into gear within a month,” says Dr. Teitelbaum. Remember, never start or stop taking a medication without consulting your doctor: If you’re at risk for heart disease, taking thyroid supplements could trigger heart palpitations or even a heart attack or angina, just as strenuous exercise could. [Your Quick Guide to Thyroid Health](#)

### 5. For Acid Reflux

#### Omeprazole (Prilosec)

**Key Statistics:** The number of prescriptions written for Prilosec surged by 8 million in 2010, for a total of 53.4 million prescriptions dispensed.

**Natural Remedy:** Try Herbal Relief First. “When people take Prilosec, it blocks the protective hydrochloric acid (HCL) in their stomach, which can lead to bacterial overgrowth in the small intestines and ultimately to mineral deficiencies by hindering their absorption,” says Liz Lipski, PhD, CCN, author of *Digestive Wellness*. “It’s okay to take Prilosec in the short term, but you should try to find the underlying factors causing your indigestion or reflux rather than just covering them up with drugs.” Dr. Lipski recommends trying an herbal fix, such as slippery-elm lozenges from your local health food store, to see if it eases symptoms before going on meds. Slippery elm coats the throat and stomach; has antioxidants that help relieve inflammation in your intestines; and boosts mucus production to help protect your gastrointestinal tract from excess acid. “Simple lifestyle changes, such as pinpointing food sensitivities so you can steer clear of your trigger foods, eating slowly, and managing stress will make the biggest difference in the long run,” she says. [Silent Signals You’re Too Stressed](#)

### 6. For Infections

#### Antibiotics, such as azithromycin (Zithromax) or amoxicillin

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**Key Statistics:** Pharmacies dole out more than 100 million antibiotics a year for respiratory, sinus, and other infections.

**Natural Remedy:** Go For a Nasal Rinse. With the ongoing buzz in the news about the dangers of antibiotic-resistant superbugs, it might be wise to first test natural cures to clear certain infections before turning to prescription meds. "Many sinus infections are best treated with saline nasal washes instead of antibiotics," says Daphne Miller, MD, a physician with a family practice in San Francisco and author of *The Jungle Effect: A Doctor Discovers the Healthiest Diets from Around the World*. Dr. Teitelbaum suggests dissolving ¼ teaspoon of salt in a cup of lukewarm purified water. You can also add ¼ tsp. of baking soda to make it more soothing. Inhale some of the solution about one inch up into your nose, one nostril at a time, by sniffing the solution out of the palm of your hand while standing by a sink. Then gently blow your nose, being careful not to hurt your ears. Repeat the same process with the other nostril and continue alternating nostrils until your nose is clear. Do this rinse at least twice a day until the infection improves. "Each rinsing will simply wash away about 90% of the infection and make it much easier for your body to heal," says Dr. Teitelbaum. When using any kind of nasal rinse, make sure the water is purified: Using water straight from the faucet can cause serious infections. If you're using a Neti pot for your rinse, don't forget to clean it regularly. [Are Neti Pots Safe?](#)

## 7. For Diabetes

### Metformin HCL (Glucophage)

**Key Statistics:** Anti-diabetes meds grew by \$1.9 billion in 2010. **Natural Remedy:** Work Up a Sweat.

[Diabetes](#) medications have a proven track record for controlling blood sugar symptoms, but adopting a healthy diet and exercise routine could keep you from being on meds for life. Being a couch potato is one of the biggest risk factors for Type 2 diabetes, but adding physical activity into your life can slash your risk—or improve symptoms if you've already been diagnosed. In fact, just one week of exercise may be enough to help the muscles of diabetics better respond to insulin so that blood flow increases and glucose can be better absorbed for energy, according to a study in the *Journal of Applied Physiology*. When normally sedentary study participants diagnosed with diabetes did a combination of treadmill walking and cycling for an hour a day, measurements from oral glucose tolerance tests revealed that they reaped a 50 to 90 percent increase in blood flow to their muscles in as little as seven days. Since the study participants didn't shed pounds in such a short time period, experts attribute the results to physical activity rather than weight loss. "Three to five days of aerobic exercise and two days of resistance training is the ultimate prescription," says lead study author John Thyfault, Ph.D., associate professor at the University of Missouri. "But any type of activity is better than nothing—just start moving." [Your New Secret Weapon to Fight Diabetes](#)

## 8. For Anxiety

### Alprazolam (Xanax)

**Key Statistics:** Women are 60% more likely than men to experience an anxiety disorder, according to the National Institute of Mental Health.

**Natural Remedy:** Write It Out. Anxious feelings may start out small but can spiral out of control. Each time you have an anxious thought about a certain situation (such as speaking in front of your managers at work), physical sensations such as butterflies in your stomach or nausea may accompany it, setting off a vicious cycle. Journaling can help you better understand what triggers your anxiety and what helps it, says Nomita Sonty, PhD, associate clinical professor at Columbia University. Here are her tips for keeping a journal:

— Take 10 to 15 minutes every day to write about your experiences, including your anxious ones.

— Start by asking yourself: What happened to me today? What triggered nervous feelings?

— Then note how you reacted to those feelings. (Believing that the worst would happen magnifies feelings of anxiety.)

— Finish by recording how you dealt with it and how it made you feel. For example, if you drank alcohol to help curb your anxiety but ended up feeling worse later, write that down. Or if you notice that each time you got anxious you went for a walk and felt better, write that down too.

"Journaling about your thoughts, feelings, and actions can help you become more aware because you can look back at your entries, so it's easier to identify your triggers and patterns of behavior," says Dr. Sonty. [Jittery? 5 Signs You've Had Too Much Caffeine](#)

## 9. For Insomnia

### Zolpidem tartrate (Ambien)

**Key Statistics:** A whopping 60 percent of Americans say that they experience a sleep problem every night or almost every night, according to the National Sleep Foundation's annual poll.



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**Natural Remedy:** Find Help From a Hormone. Staring at the ceiling praying for elusive shut-eye can feel torturous, but turning to prescription drugs such as Ambien for more than 10 days might create another problem: dependence. Dr. Teitelbaum recommends trying melatonin, a hormone naturally produced by the pineal gland that you can also get over-the-counter. “The optimal dose for sleep is 0.5 mg, but higher doses such as 6 mg will also help decrease nighttime acid reflux,” he says. [20 Ways to Sleep Better Every Night](#)

## 10. For Depression

### Sertraline HCL (Zoloft)

**Key Statistics:** Women are 70% more likely than men to suffer from depression, reports the National Institute of Mental Health.

**Natural Remedy:** Put More Fish on Your Dish. Some research finds that fish oil can have an anti-depressant effect. “Studies show that eating omega-3 rich seafood two or more times a week may be linked with a 50 percent lower rate of depression,” says Dr. Miller. She points to Iceland, where they eat a hefty 225 pounds of cold-water fish such as char, herring and cod per person per year—and have surprisingly low rates of seasonal affective disorder and depression despite long, dark winters. By contrast, Americans average out at 48 pounds of fish per person. To get your dose of omega-3s, try having a daily teaspoon of cod liver oil. Dr. Teitelbaum recommends also recommends 1 capsule of Vectomega daily. Or make an effort to eat low-mercury fish (high-mercury swimmers such as swordfish have been linked to birth defects) twice a week. Go for grilled salmon when ordering at restaurants, or make your own light tuna salad by mixing low-mercury canned tuna, such as Fishing Vessel St. Jude (find out where to buy at [www.tunatuna.com](http://www.tunatuna.com)), with greens and 2 tablespoons reduced-fat olive oil and balsamic vinegar dressing. Sardines are another great choice, says Dr. Miller. “If you are not a fish lover you can still get your omega-3s by eating leafy greens, seeds such as flax or pumpkin, walnuts, and free range meats and dairy,” Dr. Miller adds. [10 No-Fail Fish Recipes](#)

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