
HYDROXYZINE (Atarax, Vistaril) Fact Sheet [G]

Bottom Line:

Hydroxyzine is an antihistamine that is a good non-addictive option when your patient needs a rapid-acting anxiolytic. But beware of its anticholinergic effects, especially in patients who take many doses throughout the day.

FDA Indications:

Generalized anxiety disorder (GAD); pruritis; pre-anesthetic sedative.

Off-Label Uses:

Other anxiety disorders; insomnia; anxiety and agitation related to opioid withdrawal.

Dosage Forms:

- **Hydroxyzine pamoate capsules (Vistaril, [G]):** 25 mg, 50 mg, 100 mg.
- **Hydroxyzine hydrochloride tablets (Atarax, [G]):** 10 mg, 25 mg, 50 mg.
- **Hydroxyzine hydrochloride oral liquid (G):** 10 mg/5 mL.
- **Hydroxyzine hydrochloride injection (G):** 25 mg/1 mL, 50 mg/1 mL.

Dosage Guidance:

- **Anxiety:** Start 25 mg Q4H or Q6H PRN, ↑ by 25 mg/day increments every three to five days to max 100 mg Q6H PRN. May also be used with scheduled dosing, divided TID–QID. Max dose 400 mg/day.
- **Insomnia:** Start 25 mg QHS; may ↑ by 25 mg/day increments every three to seven days to usual dosage range of 25–100 mg QHS.

Monitoring: No routine monitoring recommended unless clinical picture warrants.

Cost: \$

Side Effects:

- Most common: Sedation, somnolence, daytime grogginess, dry mouth, constipation.
- Serious but rare: QT prolongation.
- Pregnancy/breastfeeding: Considered safe.

Mechanism, Pharmacokinetics, and Drug Interactions:

- Histamine H1 antagonist.
- Metabolized primarily through liver, CYP enzymes unknown; $t_{1/2}$: 7–20 hours.
- Avoid concomitant use with other antihistamines or anticholinergics (additive effects).

Clinical Pearls:

- Technically, the 1956 FDA indication is for “symptomatic relief of anxiety and tension associated with psychoneurosis and as an adjunct in organic disease states in which anxiety is manifested,” which likely is closest to what we’d consider GAD today.
- Hydroxyzine’s anticholinergic effects might raise concerns about memory problems, especially in the elderly, but it was tested against lorazepam and was found to be much more favorable in terms of both cognition and balance.
- May be useful as a “PRN” med but generally considered second line in anxiety disorders due to side effects and, unlike first-line SSRIs and SNRIs, lack of efficacy for usual comorbid disorders such as depression.

Fun Fact:

Confusingly, there are two versions of hydroxyzine: hydroxyzine hydrochloride tablets, oral liquid, and injection (Atarax) and hydroxyzine pamoate capsules (Vistaril). Popular opinion is that the pamoate salt (Vistaril) may have greater solubility or lipophilicity, thereby making it better for anxiety and sedation while Atarax is better for itching, but this is a myth. Essentially, it doesn’t matter which you use.