

HIDDEN DANGERS

Take care when using over-the-counter drugs



OUR CHOICES TODAY ARE sometimes overwhelming. Take for instance the long aisles of over-the-counter (OTC) medications in drug, grocery, and convenience stores. Because Americans think OTC drugs are safe, they often tend to diagnose and self-medicate themselves instead of turning to their physician for help. Although over-the-counter drugs can be safe, they are potent and can cause harm if not taken with care.

Use OTC Medications Wisely

Over-the-counter medications are often as powerful as their prescription counterparts and can have the same potentially harmful side effects. In fact, many OTC medications were prescription drugs that the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) determined could be used safely without a doctor's prescription. When medicines make the crossover to OTC status, drug companies must provide clear, detailed labels. Then it's up to the consumer to use the drugs as directed.

There are many **wrong** ways to use OTC drugs, but only one **right** way. To ensure a medication's effectiveness without risking harm, you should always:

- Read the entire label. Don't stop with

the dosage directions. The label will list circumstances in which you shouldn't take the medicine.

- Follow directions to the letter. One of the greatest abuses of OTC drugs is excess use by people who don't get relief with the prescribed dosage.
- Talk to your pharmacist. Discuss your symptoms and the prescription medicines you are currently using. Pharmacists are trained to know which products can be taken together and can advise you about your choice of OTC medications.
- Consider if the medication is needed in every circumstance. Time, rest, exercise, diet, or lifestyle changes will sometimes cure what ails you.
- Call your doctor if symptoms persist. Ignoring label instructions on an OTC drug can cause a health problem that's even worse than the one you attempted to treat. For example, taking high doses of *non steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs* (NSAIDs), such as aspirin, ibuprofen (Advil, Motrin, etc.), and naproxen sodium (Aleve), for long periods of time put you at risk for stomach pain, bleeding from gastritis or ulcers, and even kidney failure. And while acetaminophen (Tylenol) does not cause stomach upset,

research suggests that taking just one pill daily for a year doubles the risk of kidney disease. It has also been found that the risk of liver damage is higher in people who drink alcohol and don't eat before taking acetaminophen.

In addition to aspirin, ibuprofen, and acetaminophen, some of the most common OTC drugs to be used with caution include antacids, laxatives, diet aids, and cold or allergy remedies.

- **Antacids** provide symptomatic relief. If you need to take them too often, you may have a problem that requires your physician's attention.
- **Laxatives** are very powerful and frequently abused, especially by older adults who rely on them to maintain regularity. Overuse can create dependency and even permanent damage to your colon. Do not use laxatives when you have stomach pain, nausea, or vomiting.
- **Diet pills** are like a mild form of amphetamine (also known as speed). They increase the heart rate, raise blood pressure, and have even caused death.
- **Cold or allergy remedies** contain one or more ingredients—antihistamines, decongestants, and/or acetaminophen. Closely related products with similar

names vary in the ingredients they contain, so it's important to read the label to know what you're getting. Antihistamines can cause drowsiness, while many decongestants have the opposite effect. Also, alcohol, sedatives, and tranquilizers intensify the drowsiness effect of antihistamines.

In addition to having ingredients specifically for coughs, many cold or cough syrups contain the same ingredients that are in pills to treat allergies and colds. If you're taking acetaminophen, allergy, or cold pills, you'll want to make sure you're not getting a double dose of the ingredients by also taking a cold or cough syrup.

Special Alert for Children & Teens

You need to be especially careful when giving OTC medications to children and teens. Here are some important tips to make sure they are helped and not harmed by nonprescription drugs:

- **Children are not just small adults.** Their bodies process drugs differently from adults, so never guess about the dose based on the child's size. Follow label instructions exactly. If it says not to give the drug to a child under age 12, don't!
- **Use exact measurements when giving liquid medications.** Use precise containers, droppers, or measuring spoons (not ordinary kitchen spoons) marked for the correct dosage. TBS or TBSP stands for tablespoon and TSP for teaspoon. They are very different doses.
- **Be aware of OTC medications that can cause Reye's syndrome.** Giving aspirin to a child with a viral infection—such as chicken pox, the flu, and most colds—could be deadly. It can lead to Reye's syndrome, a rare but life-threatening condition that affects the brain. Symptoms usually

occur near the end of the original illness and include skin rash, exhaustion, vomiting, violent headache, and confusion. Later, there may be extreme disorientation, followed by coma, seizures, and death. Mortality rates vary from 20 to 80 percent, depending on the severity of the symptoms.

When buying medications to ease your child's symptoms, read the ingredients and warnings carefully. Some products don't have aspirin in

With new opportunities in self-medication come new responsibilities and an increased need for knowledge.

the name (like Pepto-Bismol), but do contain aspirin or other salicylates (aspirin's chemical cousins).

- **Avoid an acetaminophen overdose.** While acetaminophen (Tylenol) is a safe painkiller and fever reducer not associated with Reye's syndrome, it has become so commonplace that harmful overdoses in children can easily occur. Overdoses can cause anything from nausea to liver damage to death. Problems arise when well-meaning parents give their child several different OTC medications—unaware that all contain acetaminophen. There's Tylenol for colds, Tylenol for coughs and colds, and Tylenol for flu. Parents give their child something for fever and something for a cold. Over several days, this can lead to toxic doses. Giving children adult doses of Tylenol can also result in an overdose. Read labels carefully to avoid these problems.

It's Up to You!

While it is the FDA's responsibility to ensure that OTC medications are safe and effective, it's up to you to use them correctly. Keep these points in mind:

- Over-the-counter drugs should be used primarily for the **temporary** relief of minor symptoms.
- Inappropriate use of any medication may aggravate symptoms or **cover up a serious condition** that requires a doctor's attention. Don't take OTC drugs longer than recommended on the label. If symptoms persist or new symptoms occur, see a doctor.
- If you are pregnant or nursing, check with your doctor before taking any

medication—even “natural” ones.

Drugs pass from a pregnant woman to her unborn baby—a safe concentration of medication for the mother may be too high for her baby. Nursing mothers should be aware that although most drugs pass into breast milk in concentrations too low to have unwanted effects on the child, some drugs should be avoided altogether.

- Consumers who have allergies or chronic health problems should read ingredient, warning, and caution statements carefully and check with a doctor or pharmacist if any questions remain about taking a product.
- Read the label on the container carefully before you start to take an OTC medication. Check it again each time you buy a new package because there could be important changes in indications, warnings, or directions. The best way to become better informed about over-the-counter medications is to read and understand the information on OTC labels. Next to the medicine itself, label comprehension is the most important part of self-care with OTC medications. ♦