

## Over-the-Counter Medications

### What are over-the-counter medications?

Over-the-counter medications are referred to as “OTC” drugs. These are non-prescription medications that you can buy at the store without a physician order or prescription.

These medications can be very effective for various ailments such as relief of pain, fever, congestion, and cough. However, OTC drugs can also interact with other prescription medications that you may be taking. It is always important to check with your physician when beginning any new medication, vitamin, supplement or herbal when you also take prescription medications.



### What types of OTC drugs are there?

Medications have two names—a **generic** name, which is the chemical name; and a **brand** name, which is given by the company that makes it. An example of this is acetaminophen—this is the generic name for a commonly known pain and fever relief medication called *Tylenol*.

There are numerous different OTC medications available for purchase. Some major classes of drugs include:

- Topical lotions, creams and ointments used for such conditions such as pain relief of muscle aches, for relief of rashes, and for topical antibiotic use
- Cold, congestion, and cough remedies. These include cough syrups, decongestion medications, and acetaminophen.
- Nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs, commonly called NSAIDs. These medications are effective in reducing inflammation and fever; however, they can be very irritating to the stomach and they can cause bleeding in some individuals. Common NSAID's are:
  - aspirin products, such as Ecotrin
  - Ibuprofen products, such as Motrin or Advil

- Naproxen products, such as Aleve.

### **What is important to know about drug interactions and OTC medications?**

OTC medications can interact with prescription medications that you are already taking, with other OTC medications, and with vitamins, supplements, and herbals. They can also interact with some foods and beverages. Additionally, they can interact with some chronic conditions, such as diabetes and high blood pressure. For example, some cold and cough liquid syrups may contain sugar, which is restricted for diabetic diets. Some may also contain alcohol. Many of the decongestion remedies cause an elevation in blood pressure, which is contraindicated with high blood pressure disease.

Read all labels of medications carefully and check with your physician and/or pharmacist to be sure that an OTC medication you plan on taking does not interact with any medications you are already taking, or any existing medical condition that you have. Labels should also be checked for active and inactive ingredients, especially multi-symptom medications that may contain medications you are already taking or ingredients that you may be allergic to.

### **Take OTC Drugs Safely**

- ✓ Take pain medications only as instructed
- ✓ Check with your physician regarding any possible interactions the OTC drug may have with any prescription medications you are already taking
- ✓ Do not take more than the maximum daily amount of a drug
- ✓ Avoid pain medications that may make any health condition you have worse
- ✓ Keep records of all your medications—prescription and OTC
- ✓ Be aware of side effects of any medication that you are taking
- ✓ Be aware of the drug ingredients, especially if you are taking combinations of medications. For example, several cold remedies may contain aspirin or Tylenol in addition to the regular aspirin or Tylenol you may be taking. This could cause you to take more than the daily maximum recommended dose.

*Source:*

Aspen Center for Patient Education. (2001). Pain Management: Patient Education Resource Manual, 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed. Gaithersburg, MD: Aspen Publication.

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