

## POTENTIAL SIDE-EFFECTS OF OTC MEDICATIONS

### Aspirin and NSAIDS

- The main side effect associated with aspirin and other NSAIDs is gastrointestinal problems.
- NSAIDs can cause a variety of side effects related to kidney function.
- Aspirin and NSAIDs may make high blood pressure worse or interfere with blood pressure medicines.
- Aspirin has a blood thinning effect that lasts longer than that of other pain medications. Ibuprofen and naprosyn also have blood thinning effects, but much less so than aspirin.

### Acetaminophen

- Can be harmful to those who have pre-existing liver disease or to people who are unknowingly ingesting it in more than one form. It is the only ingredient in Tylenol and is present in all OTC medications with the Tylenol brand. Acetaminophen is also present in combination prescription drugs as Vicodin and Percocet which are used for pain relief.

### Cough Medications

- Dextromethorphan, the ingredient in many cough medicines, has a low risk of sedation and gastrointestinal side effects but can cause feelings of confusion, agitation, nervousness or irritability.

### Antihistamines

- Antihistamines can cause sedation or drowsiness and therefore, can significantly impair a person's ability to drive or operate machinery.

### Decongestants

- Pseudoephedrine can temporarily cause nervousness, dizziness and sleeplessness. It can also cause heart palpitations, high blood pressure or high blood sugar levels.

### Drug-Drug Interactions

- The body processes, or metabolizes, every drug differently. If drugs are used together, their metabolism and effect on the body can change. When this happens, the chance that you will have side effects for each drug may become greater.
- Many alternative treatments have beneficial effects, but some substances taken by mouth, including herbs, vitamins and Chinese medicines, may have potentially harmful side effects. Toxic levels may occur if these medications are taken in excess, or interact in a harmful way with other medications. Talk to your healthcare provider or pharmacist to prevent potentially dangerous interactions.



## OTC understanding over-the-counter medications



# OTC AND YOU

## WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT OVER-THE-COUNTER MEDICATIONS

By Deanna Germain, CNP

Over the Counter Medications (OTCs): What are they? “My back is aching from raking the leaves”, “I have a headache”, “My knees hurt today.” “What can I take for these aches and pains?”

The four most common types of OTC products are pain relievers, antihistamines, decongestants and cough medicines. Other types of OTC products include heartburn and stomach medications, constipation and diarrhea medications and medications that treat a variety of skin conditions.

Pain relief is the major reason people use over the counter medications. The pain relievers you see in the local pharmacy or grocery store can be non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (called NSAIDs) which include aspirin, ibuprofen, naproxen and ketoprofen, or acetaminophen. Each of these drugs has a different way of working.

**Aspirin and NSAIDs** relieve pain by stopping the production of prostaglandins, which are natural chemicals in the body. Prostaglandins irritate nerve endings, triggering the sensation of pain. Commonly used NSAIDs include:

- Aspirin, the medicine in products as Bayer and St. Joseph
- Ibuprofen, the medicine in products as Advil and Motrin
- Naproxen, the medicine in products as Aleve
- Ketoprofen, the medicine in products as Orudis KT

**Acetaminophen** relieves pain and reduces fever. We do not completely understand how acetaminophen relieves pain. Unlike aspirin and NSAIDs, which work in the skin, muscles and joints, acetaminophen blocks painful sensation in the brain and spinal cord. Acetaminophen is in products such as Tylenol and Tempra.

**Antihistamines** work by blocking the receptors that trigger itching, nasal irritation, sneezing and mucus production. Benedryl Allergy, Dimetapp Allergy and Chlortrimeton are examples of antihistamines.

**Decongestants** work by narrowing blood vessels in the lining of the nose and decreasing the swelling tissue in the nose. Pseudoephedrine, a decongestant used in Sudafed, for example, is an OTC decongestant.

**Cough medicines** are grouped into two types: antitussives and expectorants. Antitussives, or cough suppressants, block the cough reflex. Dextromethorphan is a common antitussive and is in products as Delsym. Expectorants are used to thin mucus and make coughing more productive in clearing the mucus from the airway. Guaifenesin is an expectorant in products as Guaiatuss and Robitussin.

### How do I know what to take?

OTC medicines can help you feel better. But if they are taken the wrong way, they can actually make you feel worse. The following are some tips for choosing medicines:

- If you have questions, ask your healthcare provider or pharmacist
- Read the label carefully and note what symptoms the medicine will treat
- Look for a medicine that will treat only the symptoms you have. For example if you only have a runny nose, don't pick a medicine that also treats coughs and headaches
- Note how much medicine you should take, and what side effects it may cause
- Note what medicines or foods you should not take with the medicine.
- Check to see if the medicine causes problems for people with certain health problems (such as asthma, high blood pressure, diabetes)

### General additional tips on OTC use:

- Do make sure that each of your doctors (if you have more than one) has a list of all the medicines you are taking including OTC medications
- Do not combine prescription medicines and OTC medicines unless your doctor says it is OK
- Do not take someone else's medicine
- Do not use medicine after its expiration date
- Do not crush, break or chew tablets or capsules unless your doctor tells you to. Some medicines won't work right unless they are swallowed whole
- Do call your doctor if you are taking an OTC medicine and your symptoms are not getting better or they are getting worse
- Do call your doctor if you have side effects or any concerns about the medicine you are taking

- Keep any OTC medication out of reach of children. OTC medications are generally safe medications and have a low risk of side effects when used occasionally by healthy adults.

OTC medications can substantially reduce levels of pain and allow you to function as normally as possible and often at considerably less expense than prescription medications.

## HOW TO READ AN OTC DRUG LABEL

**Active Ingredient:** The active ingredient is the chemical compound in the medicine that works to relieve your symptoms. It is always the first item on the label.

**Uses:** This section lists the symptoms the medicine is meant to treat. The U.S. Food and Drug Administration must approve these uses.

**Warnings:** This safety information will tell you what other medicines, foods or situations (such as driving) to avoid while taking this medicine.

**Directions:** Information about how much medicine you should take and how often you should take it will be listed here.

**Other Information:** Any other important information, such as how to store the product, will be listed here.

**Inactive Ingredients:** An inactive ingredient is a chemical compound in the medicine that is not meant to treat a symptom. Inactive ingredients can include preservatives, binding agents and food coloring. This section is especially important for people who know they have allergies to food coloring or other chemicals.

**Questions or Comments:** A toll free number is provided to address any questions or comments you may have about the medicine.