

Louisiana Pharmacists Association Educates Patients About Over-the-Counter (OTC) Medications

What are Over-the-Counter medications?

Over-the-Counter medications are drug products that can be bought without a prescription to treat minor illnesses and ailments.³ Over the counter medications are an integral part of the health care system with 93% of adults preferring to treat minor illnesses with nonprescription medications first and 88% of physicians recommending treatment with OTC products for minor ailments before seeking medical attention.² Most OTC medications were once prescription medications or currently have very similar prescription medications available.³ Over-the-Counter medications are extremely beneficial due to their relatively inexpensive prices and easy accessibility.² However, just because these medications are easily accessible does not mean they are always safe to take. But don't worry! Here are some tips for staying safe when using OTC medications!

How should I use my OTC medications?

Nonprescription drugs should be used when treating mild ailments or illnesses including, but not limited to, headaches and pain, cough and cold, allergies, or heart burn. When selecting OTC medications, it is important to choose medications that only treat the symptoms you are experiencing.⁵ For example, if you are experiencing seasonal allergies, don't pick a "cold and allergy" product when products that treat just allergies are available.

Many patients believe that because a medication can be bought without a prescription is it inherently safer than prescriptions medications.³ This is not true. Over-the-Counter medications come with their own risks, which is why taking them as directed is very important. Luckily, there are many resources available to help you determine if an OTC product is right for you. The label of a nonprescription product is a great place to look for important information about how to take an OTC product. Drug labels are set up in a standard format, so information can easily be found.⁴

Drug labels contain:⁴

1. The active ingredient and how much is in the product
2. What the purpose of the medication is
3. Uses for the medications
4. Warnings and side effects
5. Dosing directions
6. Inactive ingredients

Image 1: OTC Drug Prescription label⁴

Drug Facts

| | |
|--|---------------------------------|
| Active ingredient (in each tablet) Chlorpheniramine maleate 2 mg | Purpose Antihistamine |
|--|---------------------------------|

Uses temporarily relieves these symptoms due to hay fever or other upper respiratory allergies:
 ■ sneezing ■ runny nose ■ itchy, watery eyes ■ itchy throat

Warnings
Ask a doctor before use if you have
 ■ glaucoma ■ a breathing problem such as emphysema or chronic bronchitis
 ■ trouble urinating due to an enlarged prostate gland
Ask a doctor or pharmacist before use if you are taking tranquilizers or sedatives
When using this product
 ■ You may get drowsy ■ avoid alcoholic drinks
 ■ alcohol, sedatives, and tranquilizers may increase drowsiness
 ■ be careful when driving a motor vehicle or operating machinery
 ■ excitability may occur, especially in children

If pregnant or breast-feeding, ask a health professional before use.
Keep out of reach of children. In case of overdose, get medical help or contact a Poison Control Center right away.

| | |
|---------------------------------------|--|
| Directions | |
| adults and children 12 years and over | take 2 tablets every 4 to 6 hours; not more than 12 tablets in 24 hours |
| children 6 years to under 12 years | take 1 tablet every 4 to 6 hours; not more than 6 tablets in 24 hours |
| children under 6 years | ask a doctor |

Other information store at 20-25° C (68-77° F) ■ protect from excessive moisture

Inactive ingredients D&C yellow no. 10, lactose, magnesium stearate, microcrystalline cellulose, pregelatinized starch

The drug label above shows where you can find all the important information needed to make a product selection.

Over-the-Counter Medication and Kids

Everyone says that kids are just mini adults. While that may be true for personalities, that is not true for medications. Children can not be given the adult formulations of most medications. It is important to be aware that drugs like Tylenol, also known as acetaminophen, comes in infant, children, and adult strength. Therefore, it is important to pay attention to which formulation strength your child falls under. Some medications, like Benadryl, should not be given to children under certain ages. When selecting medications for children, it is important to read the label on the medication and follow the dosing instructions exactly. The dosing can be very specific for children, especially when using liquids, so always be sure to use the dosing device given in the product. If dosing is given by the child's weight, do not try to guess the weight or proper dose. Speak to the child's physician or pharmacist to determine a solution. Always store medications out of reach of children to prevent accidental overdose or poisoning.¹

Over-the-Counter Medication Considerations

Some additional things to consider when choosing a nonprescription product are possible interactions with *prescription* medications you may normally take, which can be found in “Warnings” section. You should also look for duplicate ingredients in your prescription and other OTC medications if using multiple products, which can be found in “Active ingredients”. If the OTC medication you have at home is expired, do not take it! Medications that are expired should be disposed of and replaced with new unexpired medication.⁵ Most OTC products have a recommended limit on how often or how long the product should be taken before seeking medical attention. For example, naproxen for headaches should only be used about 3 days a week.² Needing to take a nonprescription drug for longer than the recommended duration without the approval of a physician could indicate an underlying medical condition and require further evaluation.² The most important thing to consider is that your pharmacist is a medication expert who would LOVE to help you with any of your OTC questions or needs.

References

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