

# Choosing Over-the-Counter Medicines Wisely

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## Introduction

Think about the last time you needed an over-the-counter (OTC) medicine. You probably were faced with a dizzying array of options.

There's a reason for that. There are over 100,000 drug products and over 1,000 active ingredients on the market. There are generic brands and designer brands. For one ailment, you might be faced with a choice of 20 or more OTC medications! Choosing the right medicine for you is fairly straightforward if you follow a few simple guidelines.

## Over-the-Counter Medicines

OTC medicine can be purchased without a prescription from a doctor and can be found in a variety of locations (drug store, grocery store, all-purpose store, etc.). Medicines are safe when they are used as directed. However, keep in mind that all medicines, including OTCs, are powerful, can cause side effects or make the current medicines you use not work as well. Using them responsibly is essential in any self-care regimen.

## The Drug Facts Label

Before you decide to purchase an OTC, you should read the **entire** drug facts label. The drug facts label will tell you in simple language:

- What the medicine is supposed to do

- Who should or should not take it
- Directions on how to use it

Just as you would follow instructions given by your doctor, you want to follow the directions of the drug facts label to keep you safe. A photo of the drug facts label is located on page 2 (Figure 1). Every drug facts label will have the following headings listed:

- Active ingredient
- Purpose
- Uses
- Warnings
- Directions
- Other information
- Inactive ingredients

This layout will help you make comparisons more easily when you are trying to figure out the medicine that is right for you.

The following sections will explain the different components of the drug facts label and why it is important to read every section.

## Active Ingredient(s)

An active ingredient is the chemical compound in the medicine that works with your body to help you feel better when you are not well. It is important to know what active ingredients are in the medicine you are taking. Some medicines have only one active ingredient, and others have more than one. You should take medicine with as few active ingredients as are necessary to treat your symptoms.

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<b>Drug Facts</b>	
<b>Active ingredient (in each tablet)</b> Chlorpheniramine maleate 2 mg	<b>Purpose</b> Antihistamine
<b>Uses</b> temporarily relieves these symptoms due to hay fever or other upper respiratory allergies: ■ sneezing ■ runny nose ■ itchy, watery eyes ■ itchy throat	
<b>Warnings</b> <b>Ask a doctor before use if you have</b> ■ glaucoma ■ a breathing problem such as emphysema or chronic bronchitis ■ trouble urinating due to an enlarged prostate gland <b>Ask a doctor or pharmacist before use if you are taking tranquilizers or sedatives</b>	
<b>When using this product</b> ■ 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 <b>If pregnant or breast-feeding</b> , ask a health professional before use. <b>Keep out of reach of children.</b> In case of overdose, get medical help or contact a Poison Control Center right away.	
<b>Directions</b>	
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
<b>Other information</b> store at 20-25° C (68-77° F) ■ protect from excessive moisture	
<b>Inactive ingredients</b> D&C yellow no. 10, lactose, magnesium stearate, microcrystalline cellulose, pregelatinized starch	

Figure 1. Drug facts label.

The active ingredient section will tell you:

- The name of the active ingredient (i.e., acetaminophen)
- How much of the medicine is in each serving (i.e., 250 mg per pill)

Be cautious when combining medicines, especially if each of the medicines has the same active ingredient. This will result in possibly taking too much of that ingredient and can lead to serious health problems. If you are already taking a prescription medicine, it is best to ask your doctor or pharmacist if the OTC you plan on purchasing is right for you.

Common active ingredients in pain relief medicines usually contain one or more of these pain reliever ingredients:

- Acetaminophen
- Ibuprofen
- Naproxen sodium
- Aspirin

It is especially important that you do not combine these pain relief medications. For example, too much acetaminophen can result in liver injury, and too much ibuprofen can result in stomach bleeding. These ingredients are common and are often found in cold and flu preparations.

## Purpose

The next section on the drug facts label is “purpose.” It is usually located across from the active ingredients. This section tells you what the medicine

does. Some of the common medicines you may come across include antihistamines, nasal decongestants, pain relievers or fever reducers.

## Uses

The “uses” section is found under the active ingredients. It informs you of the symptoms the medicine will treat.

## Warnings

The next section of the drug facts label is very important information. The warnings section of the medicine label will tell you:

- When you shouldn’t use the medicine at all
- When you should talk to your doctor first
- How the medicine might make you feel
- When you should stop using the medicine
- Things you shouldn’t do while taking the medicine

Sometimes the warnings section might have an “allergy alert.” This indicates the medicine may be prone to producing an allergic reaction. Some symptoms of allergic reactions include itching, rash, swelling, hives, fainting and trouble breathing. Not all people have these kinds of symptoms. Some people react to medicines differently. Whenever you take a medicine, always pay attention to how your body feels afterwards. Your body changes as you age, so if you are used to taking a certain medicine for pain, in 10 years that medicine may not work for you anymore. So be aware at all times.

If you think you are having an allergic reaction to a medicine, do not take this medicine again. Taking the medicine again may produce an even stronger reaction. For example, the first time you have an allergic reaction, you may produce hives. If you continue taking the medicine or take a larger dose, you may stop breathing. If someone has stopped breathing or has fainted after taking a medicine, call 911 immediately.

If you think you’re having an allergic reaction, there are several things you can do. You can call your doctor, though the response may take longer. You can call a pharmacist who can help you. Or you can call the Poison Control Center for more information. The Poison Control Center hotline is 1-800-222-1222. It is open 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

The warnings section might instruct you to ask a doctor or pharmacist before using the medicine. Sometimes people with existing health conditions might react badly to an OTC. For example, a person with high blood pressure should not take nasal decongestants without talking to a health professional

because in these patients, decongestants can cause an increase in heart rate and blood pressure, as well as possibly other serious side effects.

Some medicines shouldn't be used together. For example, a person taking some arthritis medicine probably should not take some types of pain relievers. Together, they could cause bleeding and produce a stomach ulcer.

The warnings section might also provide special instruction as to when to use the product. For example, some medicines do not mix well with some foods or supplements. Others might have special instructions to take the medicine with food to prevent stomach upset. Others might instruct you to watch out for unusual symptoms such as extreme drowsiness.

## Directions for Use

Don't stop at the warnings section. The section with directions is very important too! This section tells you:

- How much medicine to use
- How often to use it
- How long you can use it

Taking the medicine as directed will help prevent an overdose, a very common reason why people visit the emergency room. If the medicine says to take up to two tablets every 4 hours but you still have symptoms, don't take more. You can call your doctor or pharmacist for advice on what you can do next.

It is also important when you are using liquid medicine that you use the appropriate measuring tool. A liquid medicine comes with a measuring cup that will help you pour the precise amount of medicine. If you have lost the measuring cup, ask your local pharmacist for a measuring tool. Usually he or she will be able to provide you with a syringe or spoon that will be appropriate. Never take medicine using a utensil such as a household spoon. Utensils come in various shapes and sizes, where one person's teaspoon can be the size of another person's tablespoon. They will not hold the right amount of medicine.

Children have medicines specifically created for them based on their age and weight. Never give an adult medicine to a child because they can overdose easily. If using a child-specific medicine, make sure you know the weight of your child and give him/her the appropriate weight-related dose. If there is no information or if you have questions about which medicine and what dose to give to your child, call your doctor, pharmacist or the Poison Control

Center. If you have children in the house, make sure your medicines are stored safely away from their reach.

## Other Information

Sometimes a drug label will tell you how to keep your medicine when you are not using it. This information would be found in "Other Information." For example, it might tell you to store away from heat or keep in the refrigerator. In these scenarios, follow the directions. If a medicine needs to be refrigerated, don't put it in the freezer.

## Inactive Ingredients

This section tells you what else is in the medicine besides the active ingredients. For example, you might find ingredients that help form the pill, add flavor, coloring, make the tablet dissolve faster or preservatives that will keep the medicine fresh longer. These ingredients are useful for people who tend to be sensitive to ingredients. Sometimes the difference between two brands of the same medicine may come down to the inactive ingredients. If you suspect you are allergic to a particular ingredient, you can look for it in this section, and if it is present, you will know that medicine is not right for you. For example, some people have reactions to certain colorings and preservatives.

## Questions or Comments

If you have questions or would like to comment on a particular medicine, there should be contact information on the box. Usually you can find a telephone and/or web site of the manufacturer. Use this information to ask questions about a medicine or to report an unexpected reaction to the medicine. Companies are required to keep track of reports of adverse reactions to a medicine. The health professionals who work for the Food and Drug Administration take these reports very seriously and watch for a sign that a medicine may not be as useful as thought.

## Conclusion

By choosing and using your OTC medicine wisely, you can create a healthier home and family. Teach your family and friends to do the same. Remember, always read the **entire** drug facts label before purchasing and using a medicine. Also remember that ALL medicines, whether they are prescription or OTC, are serious drugs. They can help when used appropriately but they can also hurt when used irresponsibly.

## References

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