

# Using Medicine Wisely

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## Introduction

The increasing number of medicines on the market, both by prescription and over-the-counter (OTC), is confusing Americans on how to use medicine wisely and responsibly. Children as young as 12 have become so desensitized to the seriousness of medicine that they have started using medicine recreationally in place of illicit drugs. Every day in the U.S., 2,500 teenagers will use a medicine to get high for the first time. The media portrays many famous actors and actresses who have died from drug overdoses. In Arkansas, medicine-related overdose deaths rose 195% between 1999 and 2004, which is the fourth highest increase in the U.S. At the same time, emergency room visits have risen dramatically over the last 10 years with medicine-related injuries such as overdosing, poisoning and drug interactions. In fact, between 1998 and 2008, there was a 520% increase in hospital admissions of Arkansans aged 12 and older due to medicine-related treatment services.

The following article provides 10 steps to becoming a wise medicine consumer.

- 1. Read the entire drug facts label.** Before you use or buy an OTC medicine, read the **entire** drug facts label. This is also true of prescription medicines. Even though a doctor prescribes a prescription medicine and you get it filled at a pharmacy, don't assume you have all the information. Sometimes we forget to tell our doctors all the medicine we are taking (especially if we have several doctors). Sometimes we

use different pharmacies (so they wouldn't have a record of all our current medications). The drug facts label carries very important information, not only on how to use the medicine but also what side effects to look for and what not to eat or take while using that medicine.

- 2. If using an OTC medicine, find one that will only treat the symptoms you have.** OTC medicines come in a dizzying array of brands and types. Some medicines have one active ingredient, others have as many as three. The formulations are specific so try not to mix and match without consulting a health care practitioner.
- 3. Know what to avoid while taking OTC medicine.** Similar to prescription drugs, OTC medicine is serious – it can help, but it can also hurt. Know what to avoid while you take OTC medicines. You can find this information by reading the entire drug facts label. For example, some medicines should not be taken with food, or with certain foods or beverages. Other medicines might produce extreme drowsiness, so operating a vehicle should be avoided.
- 4. When in doubt about a medicine, ask a health care professional.** Your health and the medicine you take is too important to play guessing games. If you ever have questions about a medicine, call your pharmacist or doctor. Calling your pharmacist has the advantage that he/she is more available to talk to you than your

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doctor, and some pharmacies are open 24 hours. In the event that you have an urgent question about a medicine but cannot reach a pharmacist or doctor (for example, in the middle of the night and you don't have a 24-hour pharmacy in your community), you can call the Poison Control Center, 1-800-222-1222. They are open 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Although we often think of the Poison Control Center in relation to poisonings, you will be speaking with a pharmacist or other health care professional who is able to answer medicine-related questions.

5. **Take the medicine exactly as stated on the label.** More is not better. Use the exact dose at the interval that is recommended on the label. Taking more of a medicine can lead to an overdose. If you are still having symptoms, even after taking the maximum dose, call your doctor or pharmacist.
6. **Use extra caution when taking more than one OTC medicine.** Many OTCs contain similar active ingredients, even though their label may market them differently. You could easily take more medicine than your body can handle. Start by reading the active ingredient section of the medicine drug facts label to ensure that you are not taking the same active ingredient in two different medicines.
7. **Don't combine prescription and OTC medicines without checking with your doctor or pharmacist.** Sometimes active ingredients can interact with each other, which can make a medicine not work the way it is supposed to work. Play it safe by always checking with a health care professional to make sure that an OTC is safe to take if you are already taking a prescription medicine.
8. **Tell every doctor ALL the medicines you are taking.** No matter how many doctors you visit, make sure to bring an updated list to every doctor's visit. This includes your dentist in the event you will have a procedure done that will require medication. You will want to include all OTCs, prescription medicines and dietary supplements you are currently taking. It is also a good idea to use one pharmacy for all your medication needs. Pharmacists have a database which stores your medication history. If you are prescribed a medicine that may interact with something you are currently taking, the pharmacist's computer will

provide an alert, and the pharmacist will be able to make an appropriate recommendation.

9. **Always give infants and children OTC medicines that are specific to their age and weight.** Children process medicines differently than adults do. It is much easier for them to overdose with a medicine. Never give a child or infant adult medicine. Never estimate an adult medicine dose by breaking a pill in half or cutting liquid medicine in half. Instead, use a medicine that is specifically formulated for your infant or your child and base the dose on the age and weight. If you have any questions, ask your pharmacist or doctor.
10. **Discard expired medicines.** Go through your medicine cabinet on a regular basis, at least once every 6 months. Discard medicines that are no longer needed, expired or look/taste funny. The best way to discard old medicines is to use a take-back program. If you don't know if one exists, you can contact your local police or sheriff and ask if your community has one. If they don't have one, then pour all your medicines in a plastic zip-top bag, dissolve the medicine in water, mix it with an undesirable substance such as sawdust, cat litter or used coffee grounds, seal the bag and throw it in the trash. Make sure it is not easily accessible to pets or children. Never throw medicines down a drain or a toilet.

## Conclusion

Medicines are serious. Don't play guessing games with them. Be a MedWise Arkansan and use your medicine wisely and responsibly. If you have questions about a medicine, remember that your local pharmacist can answer all your questions.

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