

Safe and Effective Use of OTC Medications

- Read product labels carefully. The labels contain essential information about the name, ingredients, indications for use, usual dosage, when to stop using the medication or when to see a doctor, possible side effects, and expiration dates.
- Use a magnifying glass, if necessary, to read the fine print. If you do not understand the information on labels, ask a physician, pharmacist, or nurse.
- Do not take OTC medications longer or in higher doses than recommended.
- Note that all OTC medications are not safe for everyone. Many OTC medications warn against use with certain illnesses (eg, hypertension, thyroid disorders). Consult a health care provider before taking the product if you have one of the contraindicated conditions.
- If taking any prescription medications, consult a health care provider before taking any nonprescription drugs to avoid undesirable drug interactions and adverse effects. Some specific precautions include the following:
 - Avoid alcohol if taking antihistamines, cough or cold remedies containing dextromethorphan, or sleeping pills. Because all these drugs cause drowsiness, combining any of them with alcohol may result in excessive, potentially dangerous, sedation.
 - Avoid OTC sleeping aids if you are taking a prescription sedative-type drug (eg, for nervousness or depression). Ask a health care provider before taking products containing aspirin if you are taking an anticoagulant (eg, Coumadin).
 - Ask a health care provider before taking other products containing aspirin if you are already taking a regular dose of aspirin to prevent blood clots, heart attack, or stroke.
 - Do not take a laxative if you have stomach pain, nausea, or vomiting, to avoid worsening the problem.
 - Do not take a nasal decongestant, a multisymptom cold remedy containing pseudoephedrine (eg, Actifed, Sinutab), an antihistamine-decongestant combination (eg, Claritin D), or the herbal medicines that may contain ephedra if you are taking a prescription medication for high blood pressure. Such products can raise blood pressure and decrease or cancel the blood pressure-lowering effect of the prescription drug. This could lead to severe hypertension and stroke.
- Store OTC drugs in a cool, dry place, in their original containers; check expiration dates periodically and discard those that have expired. If pregnant, consult your obstetrician before taking any OTC medications.
- If breast-feeding, consult your pediatrician or family doctor before taking any OTC medications.
- For children, follow any age limits on the label. Measure liquid OTC medications with the measuring device that comes with the product (some have a dropper or plastic cup calibrated in milliliters, teaspoons, or tablespoons). If such a device is not available, use a measuring spoon. It is not safe to use household teaspoons or tablespoons because they are different sizes and deliver varying amounts of medication. Accurate measurement of doses is especially important for young children because most of their medications are given in liquid form.
- Do not assume continued safety of an OTC medication you have taken for years. Older people are more likely to have adverse drug reactions and interactions because of changes in heart, kidneys, and other organs that occur with aging and various disease processes.
- Note tamper-resistant features and do not buy products with damaged packages.