

Tips for safely using over-the-counter medications

By Teddi Dineley Johnson

A nasty cold is going around at work, and it finally finds its way to you. At lunch time, you dash to the drugstore to buy some cold medicine.

Easier said than done. Four shelves of cold medications — syrups, capsules, pills and even hot drinks — vie for your attention, each promising to do a job better than the one sitting next to it.

When it comes to over-the-counter drugs, which are medicines you can buy without a prescription, a dose of common sense can go a long way toward steering you to the best outcome. But like prescription medicines, over-the-counter medicines can be dangerous if they're taken incorrectly.

"Over-the-counter pain relievers and fever reducers — the kind you can buy without a prescription — are safe and effective when used as directed," says Yolanda Fultz-Morris, a spokeswoman for the U.S. Food and Drug Administration. "However, they can cause serious problems when used by people with certain conditions or taking specific medicines. They can also cause problems in people who take too much, or use them for a longer period of time than the product's drug facts label recommends."

FDA is the federal agency that decides if a prescription drug is safe enough to be sold over the counter, Fultz-Morris notes.

At some point during the year, most Americans will purchase over-the-counter medications for themselves or family members. According to the Consumer Healthcare

Products Association, Americans spent more than



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\$17 billion on over-the-counter medicines in 2010. The purchases confirm just how much consumers rely on over-the-counter drugs as a

first line of defense to treat their symptoms, but here's the real bottom line: It's always a good idea to consult your health care provider before taking any over-the-counter medications, or giving them to children.



Let the label lead the way

When using over-the-counter medications, follow the directions on the label carefully, and unless your doctor specifically tells you to do so, never use the medication longer than the label instructs or at higher doses. Also, always use the correct measuring device. If a dose cup is provided with the product, use it and wash it before the next use. Make sure you know the difference between a tablespoon and a teaspoon, and use actual measuring spoons rather than the dining spoons in your silverware drawer.

The best way to become better informed is to read and understand the information on the label. Put your glasses on if you have to, because the writing is usually teeny-tiny. Get in the habit of reading the label before every

purchase, because some products might look similar or be in the same brand family, but they might be meant to treat different conditions and contain different ingredients, Fultz-Morris says.



Also look for warnings on the label. For example, some over-the-counter medications, such as decongestants, can raise your blood pressure or interfere with the effectiveness of some prescribed blood pressure medications.

If you still have questions after reading the label, don't hesitate to ask your doctor, nurse, pharmacist or other health professional for advice and guidance.

"Next to the medicine itself, label comprehension is the most important part of self-care with over-the-counter medicines," Fultz-Morris says.

Keep medicines in a safe place

Just because over-the-counter medicines are within a child's reach at the drugstore doesn't mean they can be within their reach at home. According to research from Safe Kids USA, medications are the leading cause of accidental poisoning deaths among children.

About 165 young kids are treated in emergency rooms each day because they got into medications. Keep all medicines out of your child's reach or in a locked cabinet, and never leave medicines on the counter between dosings.

Be extra careful with kids

At some point, kids get sick, and it always breaks a parent's heart to see their child suffering with a runny nose, sore throat, cough and fever.

Some over-the-counter medicines can relieve a child's symptoms, but they won't reduce the amount of time a child is sick, and not all products are recommended for children. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, overusing and misusing over-the-counter cough and cold medicines in young children can lead to serious — even life-threatening — side effects.

Always talk to your child's health care provider before giving your child any medicines, especially the first time, and check the chart on the label to see how much medicine you should give.



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