



Over-the-Counter Medication – How Much is Too Much?

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Tylenol, Advil, Claritin... Many of us have them in our medicine cabinet and don't think about taking them when we are suffering. For just a few moments, we encourage you to read this article and consider what can happen when you over-use these medications or combine them with your prescriptions. Sometimes these seemingly innocent drugs can have dramatic effects when taken in dosages exceeding the package recommendations or in combination with other drugs. Reading labels is important and these products can be used safely for the correct reasons and at the correct dosages. This article will address three of the most commonly used types of over-the-counter drugs: pain, allergy and sleep medications.

Pain medications: There are three main types of over-the-counter pain medications.

- Non-Steroidal Anti-inflammatory Drugs (NSAIDS)
- Acetaminophen (Tylenol)
- Aspirin

Pain medication should be used only as needed. The doses listed on the packages are suggested guidelines, and you should not exceed the doses listed. Side effects may range from mild (nausea) to severe (gastrointestinal bleeding and liver damage). Long term use of NSAIDS has been linked to an increased risk of cardiovascular disease. These medications should not be used with alcohol, as it increases the risk of bleeding and gastrointestinal complications. If you take other medications, always ask your doctor or pharmacist about possible interactions. If an overdose is ingested, seek immediate medical treatment.

Name	Brand Name	Symptoms Treated	Adult Dose	Possible Side Effects	Possible Drug Interactions
Ibuprofen (NSAID)	Motrin, Advil	Pain, fever, inflammation	400 – 800 mg every 6 hours	GI upset, nausea GI bleed, bruising	antidepressants, other NSAIDS, lithium, steroids, diuretics, blood thinners
Naproxen (NSAID)	Naproxen, Anaprox	Pain, fever, inflammation	250 – 500 mg twice a day	Same as ibuprofen	Same as ibuprofen
Acetaminophen	Tylenol	Pain, fever	325 – 650 mg every 4 - 6 hours DO NOT EXCEED 3000 mg/day	Liver damage with excessive use	No significant interactions
Aspirin	Bayer	Pain, fever, inflammation	325 – 650 mg every 6 hours	GI upset, GI bleed, exacerbation of asthma, bruising	Depakote, blood thinners, oral hypoglycemics

Allergy Medication: There are three main types of over-the-counter allergy medications.

- Antihistamines (sedating and non-sedating)
- Decongestants
- Topical Steroids

Some allergy medications combine an antihistamine and a decongestant and some include a pain reliever. Dosing will vary based on the particular preparation. Always read the package for proper dosing. The sedating effects of some antihistamines will be enhanced by alcohol and other sedatives. Decongestants may interact with some antidepressants. If you have heart disease, always consult with your doctor or pharmacist before taking decongestants. If an overdose is ingested, seek immediate medical treatment.

Allergy Medications: (cont.)

Type of Medication	Brand Name	Symptoms Treated	Possible Side Effects
Antihistamine (sedating)	Benadryl, Tavist, Dimetane, Chlor-Trimeton	Itchy, runny nose and eyes, sneezing, itchy throat	Drowsiness, upset stomach, dry mouth, impaired coordination, urinary retention
Antihistamine (non-sedating)	Allegra, Claritin, Zyrtec	Itchy, runny nose and eyes, sneezing, itchy throat	Dizziness, headache, nausea, insomnia
Antihistamine eye drops	Visine	Itchy, watery eyes	Temporary stinging
Decongestant	Sudafed Actifed	Congestion and pressure in head, nose and ears	Dizziness, wakefulness, nervousness, restlessness, increased blood pressure and heart rate, irregular heartbeat
Decongestant nasal spray	Afrin, Neo-syneprine, Dristan nasal spray	Nasal stuffiness	If used more than 5 days, can lead to increased stuffiness
Topical corticosteroids	Cortaid, Cortisone 10	Hives, red, itchy skin	Dryness and irritation of the skin

Sleep Medications: There are two main types of over the counter sleep medications.

- Antihistamines
- Nutritional supplements

The most common antihistamine is diphenhydramine (Benadryl). The sedative side effect of the antihistamine is usually helpful for mild insomnia. Some preparations contain diphenhydramine and an analgesic, like ibuprofen or acetaminophen. Although various dietary supplements have claimed to improve sleep, the only supplement that seems to be safe and efficacious is melatonin. Melatonin is thought to help control the body's internal clock. It is particularly helpful for jet lag or the effects of shift work. If an overdose is ingested, seek immediate medical treatment.

Type of Medication	Brand Name	Dosage	Possible side effects	Note
Antihistamine	Benadryl	25 – 50 mg	Dry mouth	Always start with the equivalent of 25 mg of diphenhydramine
Diphenhydramine	Tylenol PM	1 - 2 tablets	Dizziness	
	Advil PM Sominex	1 - 2 tablets	Prolonged drowsiness next day, memory problems	
Antihistamine doxylamine	Unisom	1 - 2 tablets	Dizziness	
Melatonin	Melatonin	3 – 6 mg	Daytime drowsiness, headache, dizziness	

You should take caution before self-medicating with over-the-counter medicines. Three important factors should be considered before you reach for that bottle:

- Do you have any underlying medical conditions?
- Are you pregnant?
- Do you take any other medications or supplements?

If you answered “yes” to any of these questions, please consult your physician before taking any over-the-counter medications.

Always read the labels of the over-the-counter medications. Store brands often have the same active ingredients as brand name counterparts and often are more reasonably priced.

The information provided here is not meant to replace the advice of your physician. Please consult with your own physician before taking any medication.