

Over-the-counter drugs

Over-the-counter (OTC) drugs are medications you can buy without a prescription. These medications are sold in pharmacies, grocery stores and convenience stores. The most common OTC drugs are pain relievers, cold and cough medications, antihistamines, antacids and laxatives. These drugs may be very helpful, short-term solutions when used as instructed. OTC drugs are NOT harmless. Any drug can be dangerous if misused. Taking more than one OTC drug at a time or mixing OTC drugs and prescription drugs can be harmful or reduce effectiveness. It is best to consult your pharmacist or doctor when taking OTC drugs. Also, combining alcohol with any drug can be dangerous and even fatal.

Pain relievers (analgesics)

People use pain relievers or analgesics to relieve headaches, tooth pain, menstrual cramps and aches from colds or flu. There are three major kinds of OTC pain relievers: acetaminophen (Tylenol®), ASA (Aspirin®), and non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (for example, ibuprofen as found in Advil®).

ASA used in larger than recommended amounts can cause serious problems with the liver and other organs, which can result in death. Acetaminophen taken in larger than recommended doses can cause liver failure and death.

Mild opioid painkillers such as codeine are often combined with ASA and acetaminophen to increase pain relief. You can buy some of these combination pain relievers without a prescription, but they are kept behind the counter and are available only through a pharmacist.

Cough and cold medications

These drugs are meant to relieve the symptoms of colds and flu, such as coughing, stuffy nose, aches and fever. Some cold and allergy medications have ingredients that can be harmful when taken in large doses. Effects can include nervousness, stomach upset, dizziness and, in rare cases, heart palpitations, headache and breathlessness.

Antihistamines

These medications are most often used to lessen or prevent allergic reactions. Large quantities of antihistamines can be harmful, especially if taken with other depressants such as alcohol and codeine.

At recommended doses, antihistamines can cause drowsiness, dizziness, mild concentration problems; less common effects include nightmares, unusual excitement and nervousness (more common in children than adults), mild euphoria, blurred vision, ringing in the ears and tremors.

Higher doses may make these effects stronger and, at very high doses, the effects can be severe, including confusion, muscle twitching, hallucinations, tremors, flushed or red face, irregular heartbeat, faintness, and, rarely, convulsions.

Large quantities of antihistamines can be dangerous for young children. As with all medications, antihistamines should be stored safely out of children's reach.

Antihistamines are also the main ingredients in many OTC sleeping aids. It is also in dimenhydrinate (Gravol®) which is used to prevent motion sickness. For more information, consult the ABCs of Gravol.

Antacids

People use antacids to relieve pain from heartburn or an ulcer. Antacids should be used for a short time only. Antacids can interfere with the absorption of other drugs; if you are taking other medications, check with your doctor or pharmacist before taking an antacid.

Laxatives

Laxatives are used for occasional constipation when bowel movements are infrequent or difficult. The most serious side effect of laxative use is developing a dependence on them for normal bowel function. Laxatives shouldn't be given to children except on the advice of a doctor.

For more information and to find an addiction services office near you, please call the 24-hour Helpline at 1-866-332-2322.