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# Use Over-the- Counter Medicines Wisely

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From coughs and colds to fever, aches and pain, heartburn and other common ailments, we often use nonprescription or “over-the-counter” (OTC) medicines to treat our symptoms. But even though OTCs are safe when taken as directed, they are also serious medicines. That is why it is so important to **Be MedWise®** when buying and taking OTC medicines. Just as you would follow your doctor’s advice when taking a prescription medicine, you need to know the facts about how to take OTC medicines with care.

## The 3 Rs to Be MedWise

Taking over-the-counter medicines safely is too important for guesswork, so pharmacists, doctors, nurses and other health experts all have the same advice: follow the “3 Rs” of using medicines correctly. Simply put, this means that when you buy or use an OTC medicine, remember to:

- **Respect** that OTCs are serious medicines that must be taken with care;
- Recognize that all medicines (OTC and prescription) have **Risks** as well as benefits; and
- Take **Responsibility** for learning about how to take each OTC medicine safely. Being responsible also means following this important rule: *when in doubt, ask first*. Your pharmacist, doctor or nurse can help you get the facts you need to select and use OTCs correctly.

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## How You Can Be MedWise

When taken as directed, OTCs are safe and effective, but like prescription medicines, they must be taken with care. In fact, many of the OTC medicines sold today were once available only by prescription. Having these medicines available without needing to see a doctor for a prescription is a plus for everyone. However, taking advantage of the many OTCs now available also means learning how to **Be MedWise** by following these simple steps:



- Read the label—every time you buy or use a nonprescription medicine pay special attention to the ingredients, and directions for use and warnings.
- Take only the recommended dose as stated on the label.
- Talk to your pharmacist or doctor before combining an OTC medicine with a prescription medicine or before taking more than one OTC remedy at the same time.
- Keep a record of all the OTC medicines, prescription medicines, dietary supplements and herbal remedies you take. Share this record with your health care providers at each visit.



## Know What You're Taking

When selecting an OTC medicine, start by asking this simple question: what is in the product?

Just as you check food labels to find out about the ingredients inside, the way to **Be MedWise** is to read and understand the information on the Drug Facts label.

Developed by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA), the Drug Facts label clearly spells out what is in each OTC medicine, its purpose, uses, specific warnings, and how to take the product. This is all in large type, and uses plain, easy-to-understand terms.

In most cases, the OTC medicines now on store shelves contain this standardized label, which will make it easier for you to select the most appropriate product and to understand each medicine's risks and benefits. By 2005, virtually all OTC medicines must carry the Drug Facts label.

When using the Drug Facts label, the way to find out what is in the OTC product you are thinking about taking is to

look for the **active ingredient or ingredients**. This is the actual medicine in the product. However, many OTC products contain the same active ingredient. Therefore, if you were to take two OTC medicines at the same time with the same active ingredient, you would be taking twice the recommended amount and that could lead to health problems. Prescription medicines can also contain the same active ingredient as OTC medicines, so **Be MedWise** and always tell your pharmacist or doctor about the prescription medicines you are taking before combining them with an OTC medicine.

## Did You Know That:

The active ingredient acetaminophen is used in hundreds of prescription and OTC medicines. Some common products include:

- Tylenol®
- Excedrin®
- Bromo Seltzer®
- TheraFlu®
- Dayquil® and Nyquil®
- Midol®
- Darvocet®
- Percocet®
- Zebutal®

## Follow Directions

The Drug Facts label makes it easier than ever to follow directions for taking OTC medicines. FDA requires each manufacturer to state how much of the medicine to take at a time (the dose), how many times during the day to take the medicine, and how many days in a row that you can use the medicine safely.

Even if you have used the OTC medicine before, take the time to read the Drug Facts label and follow the directions every time. Don't take more than the recommended amount of any medicine unless directed by a doctor.

## Let the Drug Facts Label Help You to Be MedWise

Besides learning what is in the OTC medicine and how to take it correctly, the Drug Facts label contains other important information you need to know, such as:

- *The category or type of medicine.* This information is listed under the section called **purpose**.

- *The symptoms or conditions the products will treat or prevent.* You can find this information in the section called **uses**.

- *When not to use the product, when to stop taking it and when to see a doctor.* These

facts are listed in the section called **warnings**.

- *What else is in the product.* This information is included in the section called **inactive ingredients**.
- *How to store the product.* Look for this information in the section called **other information**.

All this information is listed in the same place and the same way on all OTC medicines that contain the Drug Facts label. This makes it easy to find the information you need and to compare products before you buy them.

## The Drug Facts Label

Drug Facts	
<b>Active ingredient (in each tablet)</b> Chlorpheniramine maleate 2 mg	<b>Purpose</b> Antihistamine
<b>Uses</b> temporarily relieves these symptoms due to hay fever or other upper respiratory allergies: ■ sneezing ■ runny nose ■ itchy, watery eyes ■ itchy throat	
<b>Warnings</b> Ask a doctor before use if you have ■ glaucoma ■ a breathing problem such as emphysema or chronic bronchitis ■ trouble urinating due to an enlarged prostate gland <b>Ask a doctor or pharmacist before use if you are taking tranquilizers or sedatives</b>	
<b>When using this product</b> ■ you may get drowsy ■ avoid alcoholic drinks ■ alcohol, sedatives, and tranquilizers may increase drowsiness ■ be careful when driving a motor vehicle or operating machinery ■ excitability may occur, especially in children	
If pregnant or breast-feeding, ask a health professional before use. Keep out of reach of children. In case of overdose, get medical help or contact a Poison Center right away.	
<b>Directions</b>	
adults and children 12 years and over	take 2 tablets every 4 to 6 hours; not more than 12 tablets in 24 hours
children 6 years to under 12 years	take 1 tablet every 4 to 6 hours; not more than 6 tablets in 24 hours
children under 6 years	ask a doctor
<b>Other information</b> store at 20-25° C (68-77° F) ■ protect from excessive moisture	
<b>Inactive ingredients</b> D&C yellow no. 10, lactose, magnesium stearate, microcrystalline cellulose, pregelatinized starch	

## Taking OTC Medication Safely Is Too Important for Guesswork

Before taking any OTC medicine, always read the instructions and warnings on the Drug Facts label. And if you are not sure about how to select or use an OTC medicine, talk to your pharmacist, doctor or other health care professional.

Questions to ask:

- Is this medication safe for me?
- How much should I take and how often?
- How soon should I expect results?
- Can this product interact with other medicines (prescription and OTC), vitamins or herbal products that I am taking?
- What are the possible side effects I should look out for?
- What other OTCs should I avoid while taking this medicine?
- How long can I safely use this medicine?
- Will this medicine affect my other medical conditions? (For example, pregnancy, glaucoma, emphysema)
- Can I continue my normal activities while taking this medicine?

### To prevent drug interactions, talk to your pharmacist or doctor about:

- The use of alcoholic beverages before taking nonprescription sleep aids, cough-cold products or OTC allergy medicines. If these OTC medicines contain the ingredient dextromethorphan or an antihistamine, combining them with alcohol could increase drowsiness.
- Whether you should take an OTC sleep aid if you are also taking prescription sedatives or tranquilizers.
- Taking OTC medicines that contain aspirin if you are also taking a prescription blood thinner, or if you have diabetes or gout.

Besides asking questions, the way to **Be MedWise** is always to tell your pharmacist or doctor about all the medicines that you are taking, including prescription medicines, other OTC medicines and even vitamins and herbal products. Taking this step is the best way to prevent a problem, such as a drug interaction that can produce unwanted results or make medicines less effective.

### In Short...

OTC medicines can play a helpful role in treating a variety of symptoms, from headaches and arthritis pain to heartburn, allergies and the common cold. They are safe and effective when used as directed, but that means taking these steps to **Be MedWise**:

- Read the Drug Facts label every time.
- Follow the label directions carefully.
- If you have questions, seek advice from your pharmacist or other health care professional.

In short, take the time to be careful when buying and using OTC medicines. Just remember to **Be MedWise**.





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