Over-the-counter (OTC) Pain Medicines

Making the Right Choice for You

Over-the-counter (OTC) pain medicines are easy to buy but can cause harm when not taken as directed. Use this handout as a way to help you choose and use these medicines safely.

Did You Know?
There are only two types of OTC pain relievers: acetaminophen and NSAIDs (aspirin, ibuprofen and naproxen sodium). They treat the same symptoms but they work differently. Read & follow the Drug Facts label to help you choose the right one for you.

Know the Active Ingredient

**Acetaminophen** is in more than 500 OTC and prescription medicines including cough, cold, flu, allergy and sleep medicines.

Take only one medicine with acetaminophen or an NSAID at a time.

**NSAIDs*** are in more than 900 OTC and prescription medicines

*nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs

Check Before Buying Acetaminophen or an NSAID
You may not be able to take if you:

**Acetaminophen**
- Have liver disease
- Take certain medicines (e.g., the blood thinner warfarin)
- Drink 3 or more alcoholic beverages daily
- Have a medication allergy

**NSAIDs**
- Have history of stomach problems (heartburn, ulcers, bleeding)
- Have kidney or liver disease
- Have heart disease or high blood pressure
- Have asthma
- Take certain medicines (e.g., blood thinners, aspirin, diuretics, steroids)
- Drink 3 or more alcoholic beverages daily
- Are 60 years or older
- Have a medication allergy

If you have any questions, talk to your healthcare professional.

Support for the development of this education material was provided by

Arthritis Foundation

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Read the label carefully

**MAXIMUM DAILY DOSAGE**

- **Acetaminophen**: 4,000 mg
- **Aspirin**: 4,000 mg
- **Ibuprofen**: 1,200 mg
- **Naproxen Sodium**: 660 mg

**Dosages of OTC Products Vary**

Two products with the same active ingredient can have different amounts of the ingredient in a single pill. The maximum number of pills per day and how often to take them can be different for products from the same brand.

Taking more than the recommended dose will not alleviate pain faster.

Know the **Risks**

- **ALL NSAIDS**: May cause severe stomach bleeding.
- **ACETAMINOPHEN**: Severe liver damage may occur when taken more than directed.
- **IBUPROFEN AND NAPROXEN SODIUM**: May increase the risk of heart attack or stroke.

**Important Safety Tips**

1. Always read and follow the Drug Facts label.
2. Use the lowest effective dose or strength for the shortest time.
3. Talk to your doctor or pharmacist if you have questions about choosing the appropriate OTC pain medicine.

If you think you took more than the maximum daily dosage, call the Poison Control helpline at 800-222-1222 even if you don’t feel sick.