



# Over-the-Counter Pain Medications for Arthritis

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## About OTCs

Over-the-counter (OTC) medications are those you can buy without a prescription.

OTC medicines can be helpful for relieving mild to moderate arthritis pain. They are so common and familiar that some people may take them casually, frequently and without much thought. That's not smart – or safe. OTC medications are still drugs. Just like prescription drugs, they can help when used appropriately or harm if used carelessly.

## Types of OTCs

There are two types of OTC pain relievers taken by mouth: acetaminophen and NSAIDs (aspirin, ibuprofen and naproxen sodium). They can help ease pain but they work differently. Read and follow the Drug Facts label to choose the right one for you.

**Acetaminophen** is an over-the-counter analgesic that relieves pain (and is also used to reduce fever). It works by blocking production of the chemical messengers (called prostaglandins) that transmit pain signals and induce fever. Acetaminophen is generally safe when taken as directed. Doctors often recommend people with arthritis pain first try acetaminophen for occasional pain relief.

**Nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs)** prevent cyclooxygenase-1 (COX-1) and COX-2 enzymes from making prostaglandins, which contribute to inflammation and pain in the body. Many doctors recommend their patients with arthritis take an OTC NSAID for occasional pain relief. When taken as directed for up to 10 days, NSAIDs are generally safe.



## IMPORTANT SAFETY TIPS

- **Talk to your doctor or pharmacist if you have questions about choosing the appropriate OTC pain medicine.**
- **Take only one medicine with acetaminophen and one NSAID at a time.**
- **Always read and follow the Drug Facts label.**
- **Use the lowest effective dose or strength for the shortest time.**
- **Do not take more than the recommended dose of an OTC; it will not ease your pain faster.**
- **Avoid alcohol while taking OTCs as it can increase risks.**

But side effects are possible. These may include nausea, indigestion, vomiting, abdominal pain, diarrhea, constipation, itching, rash, headache and high blood pressure. The chance of having side effects increases the longer you take an NSAID.

## OTC Risks

OTC medicines are generally safe if taken as directed by the Drug Facts label. But having certain medical conditions or other risk factors may put you at a greater risk for



## For More Information

**Arthritis Today Drug Guide**  
[arthritis.org/drug-guide](https://www.arthritis.org/drug-guide)

**Let's Get a Grip on Arthritis**  
[arthritis.org/letsgriparthritis](https://www.arthritis.org/letsgriparthritis)

**Arthritis Foundation Help Line**  
**1-844-571-HELP (toll-free)**

side effects. Signs of serious allergic reactions are rare, but may include difficulty breathing, red or blistering skin and swelling of the face, lips, tongue or throat. It's important to tell your doctor about any side effects.

Be sure to talk to your doctor about the risks involved with taking acetaminophen or an NSAID. Those risks include:

- **All NSAIDs:** Severe stomach bleeding.
- **Acetaminophen:** Severe liver damage.
- **Ibuprofen and Naproxen Sodium:** Risk of heart attack or stroke.

## OTC Dosages

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.

The maximum daily dosage for each is listed below:

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

You must be aware of the ingredients in all medications you take, not just your arthritis medications. Many prescription pain relievers are NSAIDs. Acetaminophen and NSAIDs are active ingredients

## BEFORE YOU TAKE AN OTC...

You may not be able to take **acetaminophen** if you:

- **Have liver disease.**
- **Take certain medicines.**
- **Drink 3 or more alcoholic beverages daily.**
- **Have certain medication allergies.**

You may not be able to take **NSAIDs** if you:

- **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 certain medication allergies.**

in many cold, flu, allergy and sleep medicines. Acetaminophen and NSAIDs are in more than 500 and 900 OTC and prescription medicines, respectively.

## FAQ

**Is it possible to overdose on an OTC pain reliever?** Yes. There are no clear signs of an NSAIDs overdose, and signs of an acetaminophen overdose do not occur right away. If you think you have taken more than the maximum daily dosage of an over-the-counter pain reliever, call the Poison Control helpline at 1-800-222-1222. If you have difficulty breathing, feel faint or excessively tired or experience other signs of distress, call 911 or go to the nearest hospital.

**Can you take an acetaminophen and an NSAID at the same time?** You can take the maximum dose of both acetaminophen and an

NSAID in one day. Even if the benefits and side effects of each are independent and no interactions occur, it's important to know that some side effects may overlap.

**Should you avoid OTCs during pregnancy?**

It's best to avoid taking OTC medications as much as possible during the first trimester (the first 12 weeks of pregnancy). However, acetaminophen used sparingly is safe for short-term pain relief during pregnancy. NSAIDs should be avoided as much as possible throughout pregnancy, especially during the third trimester.