

Over-the-Counter Pain Medications for Arthritis

About OTCs

Over-the-counter (OTC) medications are drugs you can buy without a prescription. For people with arthritis, they can be a great way to relieve mild to moderate pain. But even though you don't need a doctor's note to get them, it's important to use them carefully. When used too much and too often, they can cause harm.

Types of OTC Meds

Two common classes of OTC medications for pain are acetaminophen, (like Tylenol) and nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs), which include aspirin, ibuprofen and naproxen sodium. Acetaminophen is a drug called an analgesic. It relieves pain and can reduce fever. NSAIDs block chemicals that help create inflammation and pain.

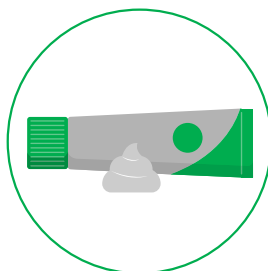
Both acetaminophen and NSAIDs can be taken by mouth. Doctors may recommend acetaminophen first for occasional arthritis relief because it's usually gentler on the stomach.

NSAIDs also come in creams, gels, patches and other forms that can be applied topically to the skin. Topical NSAIDs in the U.S. used to be prescription-only, but diclofenac gel 1% (Voltaren Arthritis Pain) is now FDA-approved for OTC sale for arthritis. Other pain-relieving topicals include lidocaine and trolamine salicylate, plus patches, creams and other formulas of "counterirritants," including menthol, camphor, capsaicin and methyl salicylate.

When taken as directed for up to 10 days, NSAIDs are generally safe. But nausea, indigestion, vomiting, abdominal pain, diarrhea, constipation, itching, rash, headache, high blood pressure and other side effects are possible. The chance of having side effects increases the longer you take an NSAID.

OTC Risks

Having certain medical conditions or other risk factors make side effects more likely. When taken as directed for up to 10 days, NSAIDs are



➔ IMPORTANT SAFETY TIPS

- If you have questions about choosing the right OTC pain medicine.
- Take only one medicine with acetaminophen and one medicine with an 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 medication. It will not ease your pain faster.
- Avoid alcohol while taking OTC meds, as it can increase risks.

For More Information

NSAIDs

[arthritis.org/nsaids](https://www.arthritis.org/nsaids)

Arthritis Foundation Helpline:

800-283-7800

[arthritis.org/helpline](https://www.arthritis.org/helpline)

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generally safe. But side effects are possible, including nausea, indigestion, vomiting, abdominal pain, diarrhea, constipation, itching, rash, headache or high blood pressure. The chance increases the longer you take an NSAID. Serious allergic reactions may include trouble breathing, red or blistering skin, and swelling in the face, lips, tongue or throat. It's important to tell your doctor if you have any side effects. Be sure to talk to your doctor about the risks from 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

Many side effects can be avoided by taking the correct dosage. Two products with the same active ingredient, like acetaminophen, can contain different amounts of it in a single pill. How many pills per day and how often to take them can be different for different products even 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

Be aware of the ingredients in all the medications you take, not just your arthritis medications. Many prescription pain relievers are NSAIDs. Acetaminophen and NSAIDs are active ingredients in many cold, flu, allergy and sleep medicines. They are also in more than 500 OTC medicines and 900 prescription medicines.

FAQs

Is it possible to overdose on an OTC pain reliever?

Yes. It's hard to see signs of an NSAID overdose, and those signs don't happen right away. But if you think you might have taken too much of an over-the-counter pain reliever, call the Poison Control helpline at 800-222-1222. If you have trouble breathing, feel faint or feel like something is off, 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 in one day. But 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 12 weeks of pregnancy. Acetaminophen can provide short-term pain relief, but don't use it too often during pregnancy. Avoid NSAIDs as much as possible throughout pregnancy, especially during the last 12 weeks of pregnancy.

Before You Take an OTC Medication . . .

You may not be able to take acetaminophen if you:

- Have liver disease
- Take certain other medicines (including certain blood thinners, antiseizure and high-cholesterol medicines)
- Drink three or more alcoholic beverages daily
- Have certain medication allergies.

You may not be able to take NSAIDs if you:

- Have a history of stomach problems (heartburn, ulcers, bleeding)
- Have kidney or liver disease
- Have heart disease or high blood pressure
- Have asthma
- Take certain other medicines (such as blood thinners, aspirin, diuretics or steroids)
- Drink three or more alcoholic beverages daily
- Are 60 years or older
- Have certain medication allergies.