

Over-the-Counter Drugs

Over-the-counter (OTC) or non-prescription drugs are medications you can buy in your neighborhood pharmacies, grocery stores and convenience stores without a prescription from your health care provider. Like any other drugs, OTC drugs can be very dangerous if misused. Combinations of OTC and prescription drugs, or taking more than one OTC drug at a time, can also be harmful.

Common OTCs used for children are fever reducers or pain relievers (such as acetaminophen and ibuprofen), antihistamines, decongestants, cough syrups, cold remedies, mild cortisone creams, and medications used for common stomach and intestinal problems (such as gas, constipation and diarrhea).

Many studies have shown that OTC cough and cold medications are not only *ineffective* in relieving symptoms in children, but in some cases they may cause serious side effects. Talk to your health care provider before using any OTC medications and be sure you know how to use them correctly.

Always read the label

All labels of OTC medications have information on usage and warning. Labels will help you know what the medicine does, who should or should not take it, how much to use, how often, for how long, and if it is safe for children, as well as the expiration date, how to store it and what to do in case of overdose. If a dose is not given on the bottle or package, or if the medicine has alcohol in it, ask your health care provider if it is okay for your child to take it.

Measure the right dose

Liquid medicines usually come with measuring devices to help you measure the right dose. They are better than kitchen spoons for measuring because they are more accurate. The most common types of dosing instruments are:

- *Cylindrical dosing spoons*, for children who can drink from a cup but are likely to spill.
- *Dosage cups*, for children who can drink from a cup without spilling.
- *Droppers and syringes*, for children who cannot drink from a cup.

OTCs and child care

Child care facilities should have written policies for the use of prescription and OTC medications based on licensing regulations and *National Health and Safety Performance Standards*. Medications may be used in child care if:

- the medication is prescribed / recommended by a health care provider for that specific child;
- the dosage can not be adjusted so that it can be taken before and after child care hours;
- the child has a chronic health condition which may require necessary or urgent administration of medicine during their time in child care; or
- not receiving the medication causes a hardship for the child and unnecessary exclusion from child care.

Tips for giving OTC medicines to children

- Keep all medications in their original containers and with the child-protective caps.
- Store all medicines in a safe place, away from food, where children can neither see nor reach them.
- If the label does not clearly describe the dosage, do not guess. Ask your pharmacist or health care provider.
- Never increase the dose because your child seems sicker than last time.
- Read the label before opening the bottle. Follow all directions; make sure you give the proper dosage.
- Do not use any medicine beyond its expiration date.
- Be aware that some OTC products have different strengths, such as Tylenol, which is concentrated if it is given with a dropper so the dose is smaller.
- Know the difference between TBSP (tablespoon) and TSP (teaspoon). They are very different doses.
- Before giving your child two medicines at the same time, talk to your health care provider or pharmacist.
- **Never** call medicine or vitamins “candy.”

References

Food and Drug Administration (888) INFO-FDA (888-463-6332), www.fda.gov/default.htm.

American Academy of Pediatrics.

California Childcare Health Program: *Prevention of Infectious Disease Training Curriculum* (2001).

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