

Preventing Over-the-Counter Drug Misuse

An over-the-counter (OTC) drug is a medicine that can be bought or taken without a prescription. These are available for purchase at pharmacies, grocery stores, and convenience stores. Even though these drugs are available over the counter, they can still cause harm.

When used properly, OTC drugs can help you feel better when you have common problems, like headaches, pain, allergies, and colds.

When OTC drugs are not used properly, it is called *misuse*. This includes:

- Taking a drug for uses other than its intended use.
- Taking a drug more often or in higher doses than what is recommended.
- Taking a drug to feel good (to get "high").
- Mixing a drug with other products.

How can misusing OTC drugs affect me?

Misusing OTC drugs can lead to:

- Addiction and dependence. This is when OTC drug use becomes a habit and your body needs more of a drug to function normally.
- Overdose. This is when you take too much of a drug, either accidentally or intentionally.

Addiction, dependence, and overdose can cause health problems and can even lead to death.

What can increase my risk?

You may be at a higher risk of harm from OTC drugs if you:

- Have trouble reading or understanding the label's instructions.
- Take more than one OTC or prescription medicine at a time.
- Take multiple OTC drugs that contain the same active ingredients.
- Regularly use other substances, like alcohol.
- Have had past issues with substance abuse.
- Have a family history of drug addiction.



What actions can I take to use OTC drugs safely?

- Talk to your health care provider before starting any new OTC drugs.
- Take an OTC drug only when you need it.
- **Do not** take an OTC drug for anything other than its intended purpose.
- **Do not** take two OTC drugs that contain the same active ingredient at the same time.
- **Do not** take OTC drugs with alcohol.
- Follow instructions on the OTC drug label. **Do not** take the medicine more frequently or in greater amounts than the label instructs.
 - Pay attention to the "uses" and "warnings" sections of the label. These sections tell you what the medicine should be taken for and when you should not take it. The warnings section also describes extra precautions to take, such as not driving while taking the medicine.
 - If you feel that you need to take a medicine more often or in greater amounts than the label instructs, talk with someone you trust so that you can get help if needed.

- For liquid OTC drugs, use the measurement devices provided with the medicine package or by your pharmacist. **Do not** use regular spoons or cups.
- Keep OTC drugs in the original container.
- Keep OTC drugs locked and out of reach of children and teens.
- Follow instructions from your health care provider or pharmacist about how long it is safe to take an OTC drug, especially if you are taking it every day.
 - If you feel you need to take an OTC drug for longer than one week, check with your health care provider. You may need a prescription medicine instead.

Where to find more information

Learn more about OTC drugs and OTC drug misuse from:

- A pharmacist or health care provider. They can answer specific questions that you may have about OTC drugs.
- The National Institute on Drug Abuse: www.drugabuse.gov

Summary

- OTC drugs can cause dangerous side effects, including addiction, dependence, or overdose, if not taken properly.
- Follow instructions on the OTC drug label. **Do not** take the medicine more frequently, in greater amounts, or for reasons other than the label instructs.
- If you feel that you need to take an OTC drug for longer than one week, check with your health care provider. You may need a prescription medicine instead.

This information is not intended to replace advice given to you by your health care provider. Make sure you discuss any questions you have with your health care provider.