



Senior Series

A partnership between Ohio State University Extension
and Ohio Aging Network professionals



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Prescription and Over-The-Counter (OTC) Medications

Medications include over-the-counter medications (OTC) as well as prescription medications. People often think medications that do not require a doctor's prescription cannot be harmful. This is not true! Over-the-counter medications also can create problems if not used in the right way or sometimes if used at the same time as prescription medications.

Because over-the-counter medications are used so frequently and can have harmful effects, it is important to know the differences between prescription and over-the-counter medications.

Prescription Medications

- Require a written order or prescription from a physician, dentist, or nurse practitioner. This

prescription tells a pharmacist to dispense a particular medication.

- Are prescribed to treat a specific medical problem.
- Are usually more powerful than over-the-counter medications.

Prescription Labels

Prescription medications include important label instructions and must be followed carefully to ensure safe and effective use. Sometimes, however, the labels can be confusing because instructions are not clear. For example:

- Take as directed. (What were the directions?)
- Take 4 times a day. (Around the clock or just during waking hours?)
- Take as needed. (What determines need?)

- Take before bedtime. (Immediately before sleeping or 1 to 2 hours before?)
- Take on an empty stomach. (1 hour before meals? Just before meals? What about in between meals?)

For your health and well-being, you need to know exactly how to take your medications. Do not be satisfied with vague instructions. Your health care provider, doctor, or pharmacist can advise you on the best time and the best way to take medications so you get the most benefit.

Over-the-Counter Medications

- Can be bought without a prescription (or order from the doctor).
- Are intended for things patients can treat with self-care.
- Are considered safe if warnings and directions are followed.
- Can be harmful if misused.

Over-the-counter medications differ from prescription medications in that the particular ingredient, or mix of ingredients, and the recommended doses are considered relatively safe and problems are relatively unlikely.

In What Ways Can Over-the-Counter Medications be Harmful?

- **OTC medications can change the effect of prescription medications.**

Over-the-counter medications can affect the action of prescribed medications. For example, making them stronger or less effective. Be sure to ask your doctor before taking any over-the-counter medication at the same time as prescribed medications.

- **OTC medications can mask symptoms of disease.** Over-the-counter medications, especially when taken for longer than the label says, can reduce or completely get rid of symptoms that warn of a more serious medical problem. For example, antacids taken for “upset stomach” may cover symptoms of ulcer disease, which can cause more serious problems.
- **OTC medications can lead to overdose.** An over-the-counter medication, when taken in high doses for too long of a time or combined with prescribed medications, may lead to symptoms of medication overdose. Once again, be sure to consult with a doctor or pharmacist before combining both OTC and prescribed medications.
- **OTC medications can be harmful.** If misused, even common over-the-counter medications, such as aspirin, vitamins, or cold remedies can be harmful. Examples are:
 - Laxatives.** Using laxatives and enemas for longer than the label

says can lead to not being able to form normal stools.

Antacids. May produce magnesium toxicity in patients with renal kidney problems or may add extra sodium to the diet which can cause problems with high blood pressure or heart failure (examples: Alka Seltzer, Bromo Seltzer).

Two Important Suggestions Regarding OTC Medication Use

1. **Be informed consumers.** It is important to be as informed about the medications we take as we are about other products we purchase (such as home appliances or video games).

Whenever using over-the-counter medications:

- Ask your doctor or pharmacist about medication interactions.
 - Read labels carefully.
 - Only take the directed dosage.
2. **Use medications responsibly.** In order to avoid unnecessary medical problems, it is important we give over-the-counter medications the same care and respect given to prescription medications.

Reference

Senior Series Volume 2, The Center on Rural Elderly, University of Missouri System.

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