

# What You Should Know About Over-the-Counter Medicines and Drug Interactions

Developed by the American Pharmacists Association. Improving medication use. Advancing patient care.

Every day, millions of Americans use over-the-counter medicines (also called nonprescription medicines) for relief from headache or arthritis pain, coughs and colds, flu, and upset stomach. These over-the-counter medicines are effective, widely available, convenient, and cost-effective.

## Do you know all you should about these medicines?

Over-the-counter medicines are serious medicines. In fact, many of the over-the-counter medicines that you can buy today were once available by prescription only.

So it is important to treat all of your medicines seriously and read all of the instructions carefully. This can help you avoid problems that may occur with all medications, including over-the-counter medicines.

## What Are Drug Interactions?

One kind of problem that may happen is called a drug interaction. There are three main kinds of drug interactions.

**Drug-drug interactions** happen when a drug interacts, or interferes, with another drug. This changes the way one or both of the drugs act in the body, or causes unexpected side effects. The drugs involved can be prescription medications or over-the-counter medicines. They can even be things like vitamins and herbal products.

Sometimes when two drugs interact, the overall effect of one or both of the drugs may be greater than desired. For example, both aspirin and blood thinners like

warfarin (Coumadin®) help to prevent blood clots from forming. Using these medications together may cause excessive bleeding.

Other times, the overall effect of one or both of the drugs may be less than desired. For example, certain antacids can prevent many medicines (such as antibiotics, blood thinners, and heart medications) from being absorbed into the bloodstream. If this happens, the medicine may not work as well or it may not work at all.

**Drug-food interactions** happen when a prescription medication or over-the-counter medicine interacts, or interferes, with something you eat or drink. For example, drinking grapefruit juice while taking certain medications may increase blood levels of these medicines.

**Drug-disease interactions** happen when a prescription medication or over-the-counter medicine interacts, or interferes, with a disease or condition that you have. For example, decongestants, which are found in many cold remedies, may cause your blood pressure to go up. This may be dangerous for people with high blood pressure.

## Preventing Drug Interactions

Your risk of having a drug interaction depends in large part on how many medicines you are taking. Fortunately,

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most of these interactions can be prevented. By taking a few simple steps, you can protect your health and avoid serious problems.

**1. Read the labels of all over-the-counter medicines.** Look for the section called “Drug Interaction Precaution.” If you don’t see it, don’t assume that no interactions will occur. Read all the information carefully to be sure.

**2. Tell all of the doctors and pharmacists you visit about all of the prescription medications and over-the-counter medicines you use.** Use a Personal Medication Record to write down information about the medicines that you use. Be sure to include those you take every day as well as those you use only once in a while. If you use vitamins or herbal products, be sure to write them down, too.

Share your Personal Medication Record with your doctor(s) and pharmacist(s) each time you see them. A complete record of everything you are taking will help your pharmacist and doctor to spot possible drug interactions. Keep your Personal Medication Record up-to-date with information about any new medicines, vitamins, or herbal products that you start using.

**3. Before taking any new medication, talk to your doctor or pharmacist.** Ask whether it is safe to take the new medicine with other prescription medications, over-the-counter medicines, vitamins, or herbal products that you are taking. Ask if there are any foods, drinks, or medications you should avoid while taking the new medicine. Never use prescription medicines that belong to another person, even if that person seems to have the same health problem you have.

**4. Ask your doctor or pharmacist for advice on over-the-counter medicines.** Your doctor or pharmacist will help you choose the medicine that best meets all of your health needs. If you can, buy your over-the-counter medicines at the same pharmacy where you

have your prescriptions filled. That way, the pharmacist can check your records to see if the over-the-counter medicines you buy could interact with the prescription medications you take.

## How Can I Use My Medications Wisely?

### Do’s

- Read the package and label of all over-the-counter medicines carefully.
- Make sure your doctor and pharmacist have a list of all the prescription and over-the-counter medicines, vitamins, and herbal products you use every day or every so often.
- Consider using one pharmacy for all of your prescription and over-the-counter medicines.
- Ask your doctor or pharmacist to help you choose over-the-counter medicines that are right for you.
- Report any side effects or problems that you have after taking a prescription or over-the-counter medicine, vitamin, or herbal product to your doctor or pharmacist.

### Don’ts

- Don’t combine prescription and over-the-counter medicines unless told to do so by your doctor or pharmacist.
- Don’t take any medicines that were prescribed for another person.