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## **Safe Use of OTC Medications**

Many of us will be making trips to the drug store for over-the-counter (OTC) medications to help us feel better. Between head and stomachaches, colds and flu, we may walk out of the drug store with many different kinds of over-the-counter medications. They are trusted and used by millions, but each year New Yorkers end up in the hospital because of reactions caused by combining OTC and prescription medications.

Usually, when we think about drug interactions or serious problems concerning medicines, we think about prescription drugs. Over-the-counter medicines do not require a doctor's prescription; however, they are real medicines, with real benefits when used correctly and real risks when misused.

Risks can increase if you are taking multiple drugs or not reading labels correctly. Consult your pharmacist before choosing an OTC medicine, especially if you are already taking prescription or other OTC medicines. Existing medical conditions make some drugs potentially harmful. For example, if you have high blood pressure or asthma, you could experience an unwanted reaction from a nasal decongestant.

In addition, body changes associated with getting older can affect medicines – how they are absorbed, distributed, metabolized and excreted. Your body may take longer to process medicines, so there can be more time for foods, beverages, or drugs to interact with one another. The Otsego County Dept of Health suggests the following steps to avoid having problems with the OTC medication you take:

- Always read and follow the drug fact label which tells you what the medicine is for, how and when to take the medication, the product's active and inactive ingredients, possible interactions or side effects and warnings. If you notice any new symptoms or unexpected side effects in your child, or the medicine doesn't appear to be working, talk to your doctor or pharmacist immediately.
- Pay special attention to the active ingredients. This will help you avoid taking too much of a medicine or a particular ingredient, which can be dangerous.
- Choose OTC products that treat only the exact symptoms you have.
- Most OTC medicines are only intended for short-term use. Talk to your health care provider if taking an OTC medicine for a long period of time or if your symptoms do not go away.
- Keep a list of all the medicines and nutritional supplements you take. Share this information with your health care provider, along with any questions you may have.

If you have a sick child, don't guess the doses. Always read the label. When it comes to taking medicines, children are not small adults. If you are unsure, call your health care provider or pharmacist.

The Otsego County Dept of Health offers the following suggestions to be sure you're giving your children the correct medicine and the right amount:

- Know how much medicine to give and when.
- Know the abbreviations for tablespoon (tbsp.) and teaspoon (tsp.). You should also know: milligram (mg.), milliliter (mL.), and ounce (oz.).
- Use the correct dosing device. If the label says two teaspoons and you're using a dosing cup with ounces only, do not guess – get the proper measuring device. Don't substitute another item, such as a kitchen spoon.
- Twice the recommended dose is not appropriate just because your child seems twice as sick as last time. When in doubt about your child's condition, call your health care provider.
- Talk to your health care provider or pharmacist before giving two medicines at the same time to avoid a possible overdose or an unwanted interaction.
- Follow age and weight limit recommendations. If the label says don't give to children under a certain age or weight, don't do it. Call your health care provider.
- Always use the child-resistant cap and re-lock the cap after each use. Be especially careful with vitamins or supplements which contain iron. They have been a source of accidental poisoning deaths in children under age 3.
- Follow the "KEEP OUT OF REACH" warning. Today's medicines are often flavored to mask the taste of the medicine, another reason to keep all drugs out of the sight and reach of children.
- Always check the package and the medicine itself for signs of tampering. Don't buy or use any medicine from a package that shows cuts, tears, slices, or other imperfections. Report anything suspicious to the pharmacist or store manager.

Drugs serve an important purpose and can reduce the discomforts of many illnesses. Be sure you use them properly by carefully reading and following the instructions on the label with every use.

For more information, visit on-line at [www.nyhealth.gov](http://www.nyhealth.gov) or call:

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