

# Poison Facts:

## Over-the-Counter Products

Millions of Americans take over-the-counter (OTC) products each year to treat illnesses. It is important to understand that although these products are legal and readily available, inappropriate use can cause accidental poisonings.

### **What are the main types of OTC medications?**

- Oral analgesics (painkillers taken by mouth): acetaminophen, aspirin, ibuprofen.
- Topical analgesics (painkillers applied to the skin): benzocaine, muscle rubs.
- Cough and cold medications: antihistamines, decongestants and cough suppressants.
- Aids for indigestion: Pepcid AC<sup>®</sup>, Mylanta<sup>®</sup>, Tums<sup>®</sup>, Gas-X<sup>®</sup>.

### **What are the effects of oral analgesics?**

Oral OTC pain medications are used for headaches and other aches and pains, with minimal side effects.

- Acetaminophen (Tylenol<sup>®</sup>) is safe and effective when taken in appropriate amounts. However, taking more than the prescribed amount can cause life-threatening problems and liver damage. Plus, many OTC products combine acetaminophen with other medicines, which can lead patients to inadvertently take too much acetaminophen. Be sure to read the active ingredients of all OTC medications, and if you have any questions, ask your pharmacist.
- Ibuprofen (Advil<sup>®</sup>) is in a class of drugs called non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs. These medications are also quite effective in treating pain; however, they can cause renal problems and stomach ulcers with excessive chronic use. Consult with your physician before using these products.
- Aspirin is used to treat pain and to prevent heart attacks. In addition to its analgesic properties, aspirin can also make it more difficult for the body to form clots. Patients who overdose on aspirin can have symptoms of an increased rate of breathing, ringing in the ears and upset stomach. If any of these symptoms occur, **contact the Poison Control Center or your physician.**

## **What are the dangers of topical analgesics?**

- Some of the topical analgesics used for tooth pain, such as Oragel<sup>®</sup>, contain benzocaine. Benzocaine can cause seizures in young children. It can also cause methemoglobinemia, a condition in which the blood is unable to carry oxygen effectively to the tissues. Even a small amount ingested by a child can be enough to produce symptoms.
- Muscle rubs usually contain methyl salicylate, which is related to aspirin. A child who ingests even a small amount could develop aspirin overdose symptoms. Keep these products out of the reach of children. In case of an accidental ingestion, **contact the Poison Control Center or your physician.**

## **How should the use of cold medications be monitored?**

With numerous multi-symptom cold remedies on the market, it is crucial to know the ingredients of the products you are using. Many cough and cold products combine a decongestant, an antihistamine, a pain reliever like acetaminophen and a cough suppressant. Because of the overlap in ingredients, overdoses can happen easily when mixing two different types of cold medications.

Accidental poisonings can occur quite easily with cough and cold products, because children's cough and cold medications are flavored. Children may like the taste and drink too much. That's why it's important to keep these products out of their reach.

Several different symptoms can occur, depending on the ingredients of the medication and how much the child swallowed.

- Antihistamines such as Benadryl<sup>®</sup> can either cause sleepiness or excitability. In extreme overdoses, it can cause increased heart rate, coma and seizures.
- Decongestants such as pseudoephedrine can cause excitability and an increased heart rate.
- Cough suppressants containing dextromethorphan can cause nausea, vomiting, drunken-like behavior, decreased breathing and coma.

If a child has any of these symptoms, **call the Poison Control Center or contact your physician.**

## **What risks do indigestion product pose?**

- Side effects from the newer OTC drugs for treating indigestion are usually minimal. Products like Pepcid AC<sup>®</sup>, Tagamet<sup>®</sup> and Zantac<sup>®</sup> can interact with several different OTC and prescription drugs, so contact your physician prior to mixing any of these medications. Children who swallow indigestion medications may experience some stomach upset or drowsiness. If accidental ingestion occurs, **contact the Poison Control Center.**

- Antacids such as Mylanta<sup>®</sup>, Tums<sup>®</sup> and Gas-X<sup>®</sup> usually contain calcium carbonate, aluminum hydroxide, magnesium hydroxide and simethicone. These ingredients have minimal side effects when taken appropriately, but accidental ingestion by a child could cause some minor stomach upset. Chronic overuse of these products can cause more serious effects. Patients who use a lot of antacids should discuss this with their physicians.
- Pepto-Bismol<sup>®</sup> is another popular product used for indigestion. It contains an aspirin-like drug called bismuth subsalicylate. A child who drinks a significant amount could develop symptoms of an aspirin overdose. Keep this product out of the reach of children. And as always, **call the Poison Control Center if accidental ingestion occurs.**

### **How can I keep children safe from OTC medications?**

Remember that products available without a prescription can still be hazardous if not used properly.

- Be aware of all OTC medications in your house. Keep them out of the reach and sight of children. Do not keep medicines (either prescription or OTC) in your purse.
- Never tell your child that medication is candy.
- Know the ingredients in multi-symptom products to avoid overdosing.
- When you have a question, contact your pharmacist.

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**For more poison prevention and first aid information, call the**

Poison Control Center

Serving the Residents of Kansas

Toll-free Hotline

1-800-222-1222

THE UNIVERSITY OF KANSAS HOSPITAL

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