

Reader's digest

10 OTC Medications You're Using All Wrong

Just because you can buy a medication over the counter doesn't mean it's always safe. Here's how you should really be using these common drugstore buys.

By Jenn Sinrich

Multi-symptom cold and flu medication



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Cough syrups and cold-and-flu medications can be downright confusing. Many even use the same ingredients just in different packaging, causing someone to mistakenly buy two different brands of medication thinking they're different when in reality they're the same. "These OTC treatments that promise to relieve sneezing, sore throat, headache, minor aches and pains, fever, runny nose, and more can lead to overdose faster than you think," says Michelle Yagoda, MD,

facial plastic surgeon, ENT and voice care professional. "This could raise blood pressure, exacerbate asthma, and cause urinary retention." To be safe, read the active ingredients list to compare products, take each medication separately and at the correct dose for your symptoms and avoid medications (and side effects) that you don't want or need. Be sure to measure out each dose carefully (including liquids) and do not take more often than recommended in the instructions, suggests Dr. Yagoda.

Anti-inflammatory meds



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Over-the-counter medications like ibuprofen (Advil, Motrin) and naproxen (Aleve) can work wonders when it comes to eliminating headaches or muscle pain, but they're not meant to be used on the regular. "While these medications are great for reducing pain and inflammation, they can also cause problems like gastrointestinal bleeding and kidney failure if used too frequently," says Kristine Arthur, MD, internist at Orange Coast Memorial Medical Center in Fountain Valley, California. "It's important to talk to your doctor before taking them to be sure your kidney function is up to par, and if you're taking them long-term, you may need to add a medication to protect your stomach lining from developing an ulcer." It's also best to avoid using these medications right before bedtime, as they're meant to be taken with a meal ideally no later than dinnertime.

Tylenol/acetaminophen



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While this medication can fairly instantly help with pain and bring down a fever, there is an upper limit to where too much of it can become toxic—especially to your liver. "You should not be taking Tylenol regularly if you have liver disease and you need to be sure you pay careful attention to the total amount you take in a day," says Dr. Arthur. "This includes the amounts that may result in the use of combination medications such as cold and flu meds." The same goes for the PM versions—for both Tylenol and Advil. Many people rely on them to sleep better even when they have no pain or cause for concern. "This can lead to kidney or liver problems when taken long-term," she says. "If you have trouble sleeping, a better option would be to take a sleep aid containing diphenhydramine, which is usually the 'PM' part of these medications without causing serious damage to your internal organs."

Sleep aids



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The two main sleep aids you'll find at your drugstore, diphenhydramine and doxylamine, can be helpful for short-term use, but only at their recommended doses. "If you can't sleep after taking one and decide to take two, it may actually have the opposite effect," says Dr. Arthur. "This can result in palpitations, dizziness, rapid heart rate, and sweating." In other words, two pills won't work better or even just as good as one. The supplement melatonin is another sleep aid that needs to be used correctly, as too many brands recommend a dosage that's too high to begin with. "If used for an extended period of time, melatonin can affect our natural production of the hormone, so it's best to start at the lowest dose available and speak to your doctor before upping your amount," she says. Here are signs when taking sleep medication is actually a good idea.

Antacids



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These drugs work wonders for relieving heartburn or gastrointestinal discomfort from eating certain foods or acidic beverages, but they should not be used on the daily—especially without your doctor's permission. "Using an occasional chewable antacid over the counter is fine, but if you're needing them daily see your doctor, as you may need a stronger medication such as a proton pump inhibitor," says Dr. Arthur. "The need for daily use can also signal a stomach ulcer or more severe problem." And remember: It is possible to overdose on these types of chewable tablets due to their high calcium content, which could lead to kidney stones, constipation and kidney failure, so avoid popping them like candy at all cost. Try some of these natural remedies for heartburn relief.

Nasal sprays



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While they seem harmless and incredibly helpful when you have a stuffy nose, nasal sprays are frequently overused, especially during allergy season. “Regular use of medicated nasal sprays can cause chronic problems with the nasal passage, such as bleeding, ulcer, and even glaucoma or cataracts with extended use,” says Dr. Arthur. Instead, use them only as needed and ask your doctor if you’re still experiencing persistent problems with your ability to breathe clearly.

Diuretics



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Whether you want to debloat before an important event or reduce pesky symptoms of PMS, relying on the use of diuretics like water pills or laxative supplements on a consistent basis can cause serious problems such as kidney failure and severe electrolyte disturbances like low potassium. “This can even lead to health concerns as large as heart arrhythmias,” says Dr. Arthur. “If you have problems with chronic bloating or leg swelling, it’s important to notify your doctor to be sure there is no a serious problem going on.”

Sunscreen



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It’s common to think of applying your sunscreen just before you go to the beach or if you know you’ll be spending the day outdoors, but experts say this is only protecting you from half the exposure you experience. “Most individuals get more sun exposure incidentally, heading to and from their car when shopping, going to the post office, walking the dog, checking the mailbox,

doing yard work, etc.,” says Dr. Frey. “Therefore, sunscreen should be applied to exposed skin daily such as the face, neck, and back of the hands, regardless of what the forecast.” Find out what other sunscreen mistakes you’re making.

Cotton swabs



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You’ve probably been using these handy ear-wax cleaners since you were little, but, chances are, you haven’t been doing it the right way. “Many people stick them all the way into the ear canal to scratch certain itches they think they’re feeling that deep,” says Dr. Yagoda. “Not only is this ear wax back there good for you, but putting a cotton swab anywhere close to your eardrum can cause serious—and even permanent—damage.” Plus, doing so may actually even push the earwax even deeper into your ear canal. Instead, stick to the lower half of the ear only and not deep inside.

Antiperspirants



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If you’re used to applying your deodorant directly after you shower, it’s time to switch up your routine. “Antiperspirants are more effective when applied to dry skin,” says Fayne L. Frey, MD, board-certified dermatologist and dermatological surgeon. “This is because they work by creating a protein plug within the sweat gland, thus preventing that gland from releasing sweat, and cannot effectively do this when the skin is wet.” Instead, lather on your deodorant once your underarm area is dry and your sweat glands are not worked up. Find out 7 weird ways to use deodorant.