

Choosing Over-the-Counter Medicines for Your Child

“Over-the-counter” (OTC) means you can buy the medicine without a doctor’s prescription. Talk with your child’s doctor or **pharmacist*** before giving your child any medicine, especially the first time.

All OTC medicines have the same kind of label. The label gives important information about the medicine. It says what it is for, how to use it, what is in it, and what to watch out for. Look on the box or bottle, where it says “**Drug Facts.**”

Check the chart on the label to see how much medicine to give. If you know your child’s weight, use that first. If not, go by age. **Check the label to make sure it is safe for infants and toddlers younger than 2 years.** If you are not sure, ask your child’s doctor.




Call the Doctor Right Away If...

... your child throws up a lot or gets a rash after taking any medicine. Even if a medicine is safe, your child may be **allergic*** to it.

Your child *may or may not* have **side effects*** with any drug. Be sure to tell the doctor if your child has any side effects with a medicine.

Over-the-Counter Medicines

| Type of Medicine | What It’s Used For | What Else You Need to Know |
|---|--|---|
| Antihistamine (an-tee-HIS-tuh-meen) | Helps runny nose, itchy eyes, and sneezing from allergies. Also helps with itching from bug bites, hives, or other allergic reactions. | Can make some children sleepy. Other children may become fussy, nervous, or restless. |
| Aspirin |  | Never give aspirin to your child unless your child’s doctor tells you it’s safe. Aspirin can cause a very serious liver disease called Reye syndrome. This is especially true when given to children with the flu or chickenpox. |
| Cough medicine | Helps loosen mucus and phlegm (flem) so your child can cough it up OR calms a cough. | Some cough medicines help loosen mucus. Others calm a cough. Ask your child’s doctor if your child needs a cough medicine and which kind to use. Doctors <i>don’t</i> recommend cough medicine for coughs caused by asthma. |

* Words to Know

allergic (uh-LER-jik)—to have a bad reaction to something that doesn’t bother most people. For example, some people may get hives if they are stung by a bee.

pharmacist (FARM-uh-sist)—a person who has special training to fill prescriptions and teach people about their medicines.

side effects—symptoms that come from taking a drug and are not part of the treatment. For example, some medicines can make you feel sick to your stomach.

Continued on back

Continued from front

Over-the-Counter Medicines *continued*

| Type of Medicine | What It's Used For | What Else You Need to Know |
|--|--|--|
| Cold medicine | Helps runny nose, fever, and/or cough. | Cold medicines have lots of different medicines in them. They may have antihistamine (an-tee-HIS-tuh-meen), decongestant (dee-kun-JEST-int), cough medicine, and/or fever medicine all mixed together. Always check to see what's in a cold medicine before you give it. Make sure you don't give fever medicine to your child <i>twice</i> —once in the cold medicine and once by itself. This could lead to an overdose. |
| Decongestant (dee-kun-JEST-int) (liquid or pills) | May help some cold symptoms. | Children may become fussy, nervous, or restless. Check with your child's doctor before giving this medicine. Scientists are starting to think it may not help. |
| Decongestant (nose drops) | Can help make breathing easier. | Never give decongestant nose drops to a baby. See "Saline (saltwater) nose drops" below instead. If your child is sleeping and eating well, there's no need to treat a stuffy nose. If your older child is using them, don't give these drops for more than 2 to 3 days. The more you use them, the less they work. And symptoms can come back worse than before. |
| Hydrocortisone (high-druh-KOR-tuh-zohn) or cortisone cream | Treats insect bites, mild skin rashes, poison ivy, and eczema (EGG-zu-muh). | Ask the doctor how often you can put it on your child's skin. Don't put any on your child's face unless the doctor says it is OK. Never use this cream on burns, infections, cuts, or broken skin. |
| Pain and fever medicine | Helps fever and headaches or body aches. Also can help with pain from bumps or soreness from a shot. | Examples are acetaminophen (uh-SET-tuh-MIN-uh-fin) and ibuprofen (eye-byoo-PROH-fin). Tylenol is one brand name for acetaminophen. Advil and Motrin are brand names for ibuprofen. |
| Saline (saltwater) nose drops | May help if your baby is having trouble eating or sleeping because of a stuffy nose. | Put 1 to 2 drops into each side of the nose. Then use a bulb syringe to suck out the drops and mucus. Using a bulb syringe can make the nose sore, so try not to use it too often. |
| Stomach medicines | Treats problems like heartburn, gas, not being able to pass stool (constipation), or loose, runny stools (diarrhea). | There are different kinds of medicines, depending on what the problem is. Talk with your child's doctor before using any of them. Most of these problems go away on their own. Sometimes just changing your child's diet helps. Some stomach medicines also contain aspirin, which can harm your child. See "Aspirin" on the first page of this handout. |

To learn more, visit the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) Web site at www.aap.org.

Your child's doctor will tell you to do what's best for your child.

This information should not take the place of talking with your child's doctor.

Note: Brand names are for your information only. The AAP does not recommend any specific brand of drugs or products.

Adaptation of the AAP information in this handout into plain language was supported in part by McNeil Consumer Healthcare.

© 2008 American Academy of Pediatrics

American Academy
of Pediatrics



DEDICATED TO THE HEALTH OF ALL CHILDREN™