

Health Tips

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with

Dr. D



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Health Tip: Appropriate Use of OTC Medicines

On a recent visit to the local pharmacy, I was fascinated to see the number of over-the-counter (OTC) products that were formerly available only by prescription. Compared to 30 years ago, there are literally hundreds of these products that use ingredients or dosage strengths that were previously available only by prescription. In most cases, OTC medications are just as effective, and cost less than their prescription counterparts. Just a few of these now-available OTC medications include:

- **Omeprazole (Prilosec)**, one of the best medications available for treatment of gastroesophageal reflux, gastritis and peptic ulcer.
- **Lamisil cream**, a highly effective topical treatment for athlete's foot and other fungal infections of the skin.
- **Claritin and Zyrtec**, non-sedating antihistamines.
- **Naphcon A**, eye drops, used for seasonal allergies.
- **Freeze Away** and **Compound W Freeze Off**, systems that freeze warts off, can even be purchased without a prescription.



While the availability of these medications and treatments is a great boon to the consumer, there are certain measures that need to be taken to assure the safe and effective use of these products.

Make sure that the treatment fits the ailment. Although this seems obvious, one of the most important functions of a

health care provider is to make an accurate diagnosis before offering treatment. In many cases, this requires diagnostic skills or tests that are not available to the lay public. This is critical when considering the use of OTC medications. Without these skills and access to testing, it is easy to imagine that a consumer could select an inappropriate OTC treatment. For example, the currently available products for freezing skin lesions specify that they are used for the treatment of warts only. Using this system for what is actually a skin cancer

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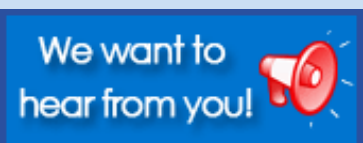
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(even though they are sometimes appropriately used for this) could lead to delay in definitive treatment and spread of the cancer. This does not mean that OTC products should never be used without first consulting a doctor, but if there is any doubt as to the underlying problem, have the condition confirmed by a physician and get approval for use of an OTC product.

Become a label reader. You wouldn't ignore your doctor's instructions for using a prescription drug; so don't ignore the label when taking an OTC medicine. Here's what to look for:

- **Active Ingredient.** The active ingredient is the chemical compound in the medicine that works to relieve symptoms. It is always the first item on the label, although there may be more than one active ingredient in a product.
- **Purpose.** The product category (such as antihistamine, antacid, or cough suppressant).
- **Uses.** The symptoms the medicine is meant to treat. Uses are sometimes referred to as "indications."
- **Warnings.** When not to use the product, when to stop taking it, when to see a doctor, and possible side effects.
- **Inactive Ingredients.** Substances such as binders, colors, or flavoring.
- **Directions.** How much to take, how to take it, and how long to take it.
- **Other information.** This includes information such as how to store the product.



Avoiding side effects and interactions. OTC medications, just like prescription ones, can cause adverse reactions. Additionally, taking some OTC medications along with prescription medicines can produce unwanted results or make the medicines less effective. The American Academy of Family Physicians has provided the following recommendations for avoiding adverse effects when taking OTC medications:

1. Read the drug label carefully.
2. Make sure you know what ingredients the product contains and understand any warnings or possible adverse effects.
3. If you don't understand something, ask your doctor or pharmacist about it.
4. If you take any prescription drugs, ask your doctor before taking an OTC drug.
5. Don't stir medicine into your food or take capsules apart (unless your doctor tells you to). This may change the way the drug works.
6. Don't take vitamin pills at the same time you take medicine. Vitamins and minerals can cause problems if taken with some drugs.
7. Don't mix medicine into hot drinks unless the label tells you to. The heat may keep the drug from working as it should.
8. Don't take OTC medicines with alcoholic beverages.

For more information on appropriate use of OTC medications go to FamilyDoctor.Org. Remember that an informed consumer of OTC medications

is a wise consumer.

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