

How to Use Over-the-counter Pain Medicine

General Information

Two popular over-the-counter pain relievers are acetaminophen and non-steroidal anti-inflammatory medicines.

Acetaminophen

Acetaminophen relieves pain and fever by changing the way your brain perceives pain. One brand name is Tylenol®.

Acetaminophen is also used with other prescription pain relievers. Together, these pain medicines target the central nervous system to relieve pain. Some brand names of prescription pain relievers with acetaminophen include Percocet® and Norco®.

Non-steroidal Anti-inflammatory Medicines (NSAIDs)

NSAIDs relieve swelling, stiffness, cramps, joint pain, muscle pain, and reduce fever. They block some of the body's chemicals that cause pain and swelling.

NSAIDs may upset your stomach if you take large doses or take the medicine for periods of time. You are also at risk for an ulcer.

Types of NSAIDs are ibuprofen (Advil®, Motrin®) and naproxen (Aleve®, Naprosyn®, Anaprox®). NSAIDs are also used with other prescription pain medicine.

Tips for Taking Acetaminophen and NSAIDs

- Start taking your medicine before your pain gets too strong.
- Take your medicine as directed.
- Pain medicines take time to start working.
- After a couple of days, when your pain is under control, take the medicine only when needed.
- You **may** take acetaminophen and NSAIDs together, unless your doctor gives you other directions.
- You cannot become addicted to over-the-counter pain medicines.
- **Acetaminophen tips:**
 - The usual dose is 325 to 1,000 mg every 4 to 6 hours (as needed).
 - Do not take more than 3,000 mg (3 grams) in 24 hours, unless your doctor says you can take more.
 - Take 2 pills every 6 hours as long as you have symptoms.
 - Do not take more than 6 pills in 24 hours.
 - Take with a full glass of water to avoid stomach upset.
 - Take as prescribed by your doctor, or as listed on the label.
 - Many other medicines (such as cough and cold products) contain acetaminophen. If you are taking other medicines, read all labels to make sure you know how much acetaminophen you are taking. Too much acetaminophen can lead to liver damage.
- **NSAIDs tips:**
 - Ibuprofen (Advil®, Motrin®)
 - The usual adult dose is 200 to 400 mg every 4 to 6 hours (as needed), or as directed by your doctor.

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- Do not take more than 2,400 mg in 24 hours, or for more than 10 days, unless your doctor gave you other directions. Do not take more than 12 pills of 200 mg strength a day.
 - Take with food to avoid upset stomach.
- Naproxen (Aleve[®], Naprosyn[®], Anaprox[®])
- The usual dose is 220 to 500 mg every 6 to 8 hours (as needed).
 - Do not take more than 1,500 mg in 24 hours, or for more than 10 days, unless your doctor gave you other directions.
 - Take with food to avoid upset stomach.
 - Talk with your doctor or pharmacist if you take aspirin each day or if you have any questions.

How to Read the Label

- Read the labels of all over-the-counter medicines you take. Do not take more than the maximum dose listed on the package unless your doctor gives you other directions.
- Look at the expiration date. Do not take outdated medicines of any kind.
- Talk with your doctor or pharmacist before you start taking any other medicine, including vitamins and herbals.

How To Store Medicine

- Keep all medicines away from heat, light and humidity. Do not keep medicines in the bathroom or near the kitchen sink. Keep them in their original bottles.
- Keep *all* medicines out of reach of children and pets.

When Not to Take Acetaminophen or NSAIDs

- Talk with your doctor before taking acetaminophen or NSAIDs if you have kidney disease, liver disease, heart failure, stomach disorders, or if you are already taking aspirin or warfarin therapy.
- Do not take acetaminophen or NSAIDs if you have 3 or more alcoholic drinks a day.
- Do not take acetaminophen if you are allergic to it.
- Do not take NSAIDs if you are allergic to NSAIDs or aspirin.

When To Call Your Doctor

Call your doctor right away if you:

- have trouble breathing or chest tightness
- feel lightheaded, faint, weak
- cough up blood
- have severe stomach pain, vomit that looks like coffee grounds, nausea, loss of appetite
- have bloody or dark-colored urine, or stools that are bloody, black, tarry, or pale
- have itching, hives, or a rash that blisters, peels or turns red
- have swelling in your face or hands
- have unusual bleeding or bruising
- have new pain or pain that gets worse.

Contact your doctor if you have been taking over-the-counter pain medicine for longer than 14 days.