

Be Medwise About Your Child's Medicines

Eugene Smith, PharmD, MPH
Associate Professor, Clinical Pharmacy
Barbara (Bobbi) P. Clarke, PhD, RD
Professor, Community Health Education



The use of medications, both prescription and over-the-counter (OTC), is increasing among children. One out of eight children takes prescription medications on a regular basis. As a parent, you can protect your child's health by asking good questions and reading the label on all medications selected for your child.

What you need to know about prescription medicines that are given to your child by mouth:

- The name of the medicine.
- What the medicine is for.
- The dose (amount) of the medicine to give.
- The number of times a day the medicine should be given.
- The times of the day the medicine should be given.
- Whether the medicine should be given with food.
- The number of days the medicine should be given.
- How you will know if the medicine is working.
- The most common and important possible side effects.

What You Should Know About Antibiotics

Antibiotics are powerful medicines, but they are not the right treatment for all illnesses. Most illnesses are caused by one of two kinds of germs: bacteria or viruses. Antibiotics can treat bacterial infections, but not viral infections. Your doctor may prescribe an antibiotic to treat specific bacterial infections such as strep throat, some pneumonia and sinus infections.

If your child has a cold, runny nose or cough, your child's doctor may decide that your child does not need an antibiotic because these illnesses are usually caused by viruses. Taking an antibiotic when your child does not need it can make the bacteria stronger and harder to kill, leading to antibiotic resistance. When the bacteria resist antibiotics, your child can get very sick. The antibiotic can no longer cure your child's illness. A stronger medicine or a stay in the hospital may be necessary to get well. The more times your child takes an antibiotic, the more likely he/she can develop antibiotic resistance or even an allergy to the antibiotic.

Be sure to give your child the right dose of the antibiotic for as long as the directions say. Not finishing

Did You Know That Taking Medications Is As Easy as PIE?

If you know the purpose of each medication, understand the instructions for use and dosage and know the outcomes (effects) to expect, then taking your medication can be as easy as **PIE**.

Purpose and name of the medication.

Instructions for use and dosage:

How many times a day?

Time of day?

With food or without food?

How long to take it?

What if I miss a dose?

Should I avoid alcohol, sunlight, certain foods, etc.?

Effects of the drug, both positive and negative.

Keep a record of all medications your child is taking. This record should include prescription and OTC medications as well as herbal and vitamin/mineral supplements. Also list your child's allergies or drugs that have caused any negative reactions. A UT Med Minder card will help you remember what medications your child is taking. Call your county UT Extension office or print out this wallet-size medication record from the UT Extension Health Program Web page at www.utextension.utk.edu/publications/spfiles/SP632.pdf.

the antibiotic medicine means that only part of the infection has not been treated and resistant bacteria can develop.

Tips for Giving Your Child an OTC Medication

- When your child gets sick, you may reach for an OTC medication. However, OTC drugs are serious medicines that can do harm if taken incorrectly. Always follow the dosing directions on the label. Use a dropper or dosing cup to accurately measure the medication dosage. These usually come packaged with the medicine. Do not use a household spoon or guess the amount, which can lead to giving your child too large or small an amount. Read the “Drug Facts” label carefully to know the uses, warnings and side effects.
- The use of cold and cough medications does not cure the cold or cough. These medications only treat the symptoms, such as runny nose, congestion, fever and aches. Using this medication does not shorten the length of time your child is sick.
- It is recommended that cough and cold medications are not given to children under 4 years of age. Acetaminophen or ibuprofen can be given for fever for children of any age. Read the label for dosage instructions.
- If you are giving your child several over-the-counter medications, make sure the drugs do not either contain the same active ingredients or contain different active ingredients that serve the same purpose. For example, both cough and cold medications may contain the same active ingredient. Or two cold medicines may contain different active ingredients that are both fever reducers. Either could result in you giving your child too large a dose. To prevent giving your child too much of a specific ingredient, read the “Drug Facts” label and compare active ingredients and purpose of each OTC medication.
- Do not hesitate to ask your pharmacist any questions about a specific over-the-counter medication.

Safety Tips

- Don’t give your child a medicine in the dark. You can make a mistake reading the dosing (measuring) device.
- Teach your child that medicines are not candy.
- Keep all medicines out of your child’s reach. Remind relatives to do the same when your child visits them.
- Always give your child the amount prescribed or recommended for each medicine. Giving too much medicine can be dangerous – more is not better.

What does giving the medicine every six hours mean? When the medicine label says “take every six hours,” that generally means the medicine is taken four times a day at breakfast, lunch, dinner and bedtime rather than over a 24-hour period. It does not mean waking the child up in the night to take medicine. And “take every eight hours” usually means the medicine should be taken three times during the day.

Always check with your pharmacist before giving your child an OTC medication. These drugs are as powerful as some prescription drugs. OTC medications can interact with prescription or other OTC drugs or badly affect another health condition.

- Keep in mind that most OTC medicines are for short-term relief of minor symptoms. Call your child's doctor if the condition persists or gets worse.
- Always have your child finish prescribed medicine even if he or she is feeling better. The opposite is true of an OTC medication. It is OK to stop taking the medication once your child is feeling better.
- Always share all of the OTC medicines your child is taking with your child's doctor before a new medicine is prescribed.
- If you or your child have any problems with a medicine, such as unpleasant side effects or your child refuses to take the medication, call your doctor or pharmacist right away. The Tennessee Poison Center is a community resource you can also call (1-800-222-1222) if you have a question about a medicine or if you suspect your child is having a reaction to a medicine. This service is open 24 hours a day, seven days a week. The center is an especially useful resource at night when you may not be able to contact your doctor or pharmacist. The professional staff will immediately instruct you on how to care for your child. All calls are free of charge. To learn more about the poison center, visit its Web site at www.tnpoisoncenter.org.

This publication is brought to you by the UT Center for Community Health Literacy, a partnership between the UT College of Pharmacy and UT Extension.



For more information about medication use and safety, check out the Be MedWise Tennessee Program, a partnership program with the National Council on Patient Information and Education, the UT College of Pharmacy and UT Extension, at bemedwisetn.tennessee.edu or contact your county UT Extension office at:



R12-5310-133-035-09 SP716-10M-03/09 09-0176