



THE FAMILY PHARMACIST

A QUICK READ FOR YOUR OTC NEED!

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OVER-THE-COUNTER MEDICINES AND DRUG INTERACTIONS

A 1998 article in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* stated regarding drug interactions in all age groups, "If medication-related problems were ranked as a disease by cause of death, it would be the fifth leading cause of death in the United States." And things have gotten worse, not better since then. A 2017 study shows that about one-third of older adults in the US take five to seven prescription drugs simultaneously (not to mention over-the-counter [OTC] medicines). Half of all people taking prescription drugs use at least one dietary supplement or OTC medicine. One study reported that at seven or more medicines, your risk of a drug interaction is 82%. Another study states that adverse effects of drug interactions are "prevalent, serious, and expensive," with associated costs in the US estimated to be at least 30 billion dollars annually.

Most of us don't give any thought to a drug interaction with prescription medicine that we're taking when we go to the pharmacy to buy an OTC drug for our cold symptoms, or some other temporary malady. Some believe that prescription drugs are more potent so interactions only happen with prescription medicine. But the line between prescription drugs and OTC medications is illusory. Many OTC drugs hit the market as prescription medicines and have since gone OTC. Drug interactions do not discriminate between prescription and over-the-counter ingredients. It makes no difference. Any drug can interact in a potentially negative way with another drug, food or drink, a dietary supplement, or even be influenced by your medical condition. Consider the following interactions.

Drug-Drug Interactions. These interactions are often caused when one drug affects the way another drug is metabolized by enzymes in the gastrointestinal tract or the liver. An added drug might either reduce or increase the activity of these enzymes. This can exaggerate or reduce the effectiveness of your medicine. For instance, Some OTC antihistamines (taken for a cold or cough) can increase the depressant effects (such as sleepiness) of a sedative or tranquilizer medicine. The sedating effect of some antihistamines combined with certain prescription antidepressants could strongly affect your judgment and your ability to concentrate.

Drug-Food Interactions. It's easy to see how food and beverages can interfere with a drug since most drugs taken by mouth get absorbed into the bloodstream through the gastrointestinal tract. Some of these interactions have been known for a long time. Alcohol and grapefruit juice are examples of foods that can interact with medicines. Alcohol is a no-brainer to avoid if you are using it at the same time you take a drug that can cause drowsiness. But alcohol can interact in more subtle ways with other medicines too. Since alcohol can increase or decrease the effectiveness of many drugs, ask your pharmacist if alcohol will interact with your medicines. Sometimes it's just a matter of waiting a week or so to see how a new medicine will affect you before resuming alcohol.

Drug-Supplement Interactions. Research has shown that 50 percent or more of American adults use *dietary supplements* regularly. These supplements include *vitamins, minerals, amino acids, and herbs or botanicals*, as well as other substances that can be used to supplement the diet. These supplements are sometimes referred to as "alternative medicines." St. John's wort, licorice root, ginseng, and Ginkgo biloba are popular examples of dietary supplements that you should be cautious of mixing with medicines. St. John's wort (used to treat mild depression and seasonal affective disorder), for example, can *decrease* the effectiveness of oral contraceptives, as well as the new and very popular blood thinners, Eliquis and Xarelto, and possibly others. Licorice root (in an herbal concentrate) can increase the effect of oral steroids and steroids applied to the skin.

Drugs and the Elderly. You can imagine how medication-related problems are much more a reason for concern in the elderly. A staggering thirty percent of hospital admissions in *elderly patients* may be linked to drug-related problems or drug toxic effects. In 1991, geriatrician Mark Beers published criteria for elderly drug use in the journal, *Archives of Internal Medicine*. This was eventually adopted by the American Geriatrics Society (AGS) and updated by a team of experts to help healthcare providers improve medication safety in older adults. This document is now well known by health care providers as *Beers Criteria*. Before this time, not enough attention was being paid to the

inappropriate use of medication in the elderly, who are usually identified as people over age 65. The issue of safe medication use in older persons is important to all of us because, no matter our age, we all have parents, relatives, or friends who may be elderly. But, as mentioned above, the use of multiple drugs (or more than are medically necessary) is common among the elderly.

Recommendation: So what can we all do to play it safe? The solution for avoiding drug interactions of any kind is very simple. Be diligent. If you take multiple prescription drugs and sometimes use an OTC medicine, vitamin, or herbal remedy, be aware of the potential for interactions. Make sure the OTC medicine is appropriate for your age. Read labels and take the warnings seriously.

Take advantage of the resources that are available to you. Because OTC medicines are self-serve, it's unlikely that pharmacists will volunteer assistance with choosing an OTC product. Approaching the pharmacist directly is a service that should be taken advantage of more often. All pharmacies today use drug interaction checking software. If you think an OTC drug might be causing an interaction with a prescription medicine you take, ask your pharmacist to add any OTC drugs you are taking into their computer along with your regular medicines to check for possible interaction. Try to fill your prescriptions at one pharmacy, although this can be a challenge.

Quiz your doctor about any supplements you're taking in addition to your prescription drugs, and make sure you understand why you must take any new drugs she/he adds to your treatment. Don't believe everything you read about supplements on the Internet.

Remember that all things are made of chemicals. Even if the product is labeled as "natural" it still contains chemical ingredients that can interact with a prescription drug or OTC medicine.

References on file

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