

A Guide to Your Child's Medicines



If you are confused or have questions about your child's medicines, you are not alone. The instructions that come with medicines can be hard to read and understand. For your child's health and safety, it's important that you understand this information. Read on to find out more about your child's medicines.

Ask questions

Before you give your child any medicines, be sure you know how to use them. The following are questions you can ask your pediatrician or pharmacist:

- What is the name of the medicine?
- How will it help my child?
- Do I need to do anything *before* I give this medicine to my child?
- How much medicine do I give my child? When? For how long?
- Should my child avoid certain activities or not eat certain foods while using this medicine?
- Should my child not take other medicines, herbal products, or supplements?
- Are there any side effects?
- Is there anything special I need to know? (For example, is the dose larger than usual?)
- Is there any written information you can give me?
- What do I do if my child misses a dose?
- What do I do if I give my child too much?
- What if my child spits it out?
- Does it come in chewable tablets or liquid?
- Can you show me how to use this medicine?
- (If it's a prescription) Can this prescription be refilled? How many times?

Prescription medicines

Medicines that only a doctor (and some other health professionals) can order are called *prescription medicines*. They may be generic or brand name. Generic medicines cost less than brand-name medicines but aren't always available. Sometimes it's more important to use the brand name. Ask your pediatrician what's best for your child.

The following are common prescription medicines for children:

- **Antibiotics.** Used for some bacterial infections like strep throat. Also used for some types of infections of the ear, sinus, urinary tract, and skin. Antibiotics usually don't cause problems but can have some side effects. Side effects may include skin rash, loose stools, upset stomach, staining of urine, or allergic reactions. Antibiotics don't work on viral infections like colds and the flu. The overuse of antibiotics has caused some bacteria to become resistant to them. This is why your pediatrician may not always treat a bacterial infection with an antibiotic.

If your child goes to the hospital, do the following:

- Bring your child's health records.
- If your child is taking any medicines, including supplements, vitamins, herbal products, or home remedies, bring them to the hospital in their original containers. Write down when your child last took the medicines, and bring the note with you.
- Ask about any medicines your child is given while in the hospital. Keep a diary of what types of medicines are given to your child and when. Make sure to note any allergic reactions.

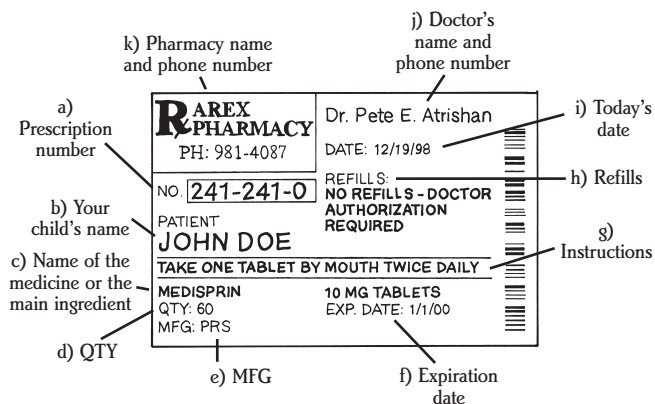
- **Ear drops.** Used for inflammation and infections of the ear canal. Side effects may include itching, feeling like the ears are clogged, or a "popping" sound in the ear.
- **Eyedrops or ointment.** Used for eye infections, allergies, or vision problems. Some children may get puffy eyes or say the drops hurt their eyes.
- **Inhalers.** Used to treat asthma and inflammation of the lungs. Your pediatrician will show you how to use an inhaler.
- **Nasal sprays.** Used to treat sinus problems or allergies. Certain types of sprays should only be used for a short time. Check with your pediatrician about how to use your nasal spray.
- **Skin products.** Used for skin infections, burns, parasites/mites, rashes, and acne. In general they are well tolerated, but your child's skin may get irritated. Also, special care is needed when using medicines that contain steroids or medicines for lice and scabies. They can have serious side effects if used too long.

All medicines have the potential to cause allergic reactions. Remember to let your pediatrician know if your child has any side effects to any medicine. Side effects may include vomiting or hives or other skin rashes.

Read the label

The following information is found on a prescription label:

- Prescription number.** Your pharmacy will ask for this number when you call in for a refill. You may also need this number when filling out insurance forms.
- Your child's name.** Never give your child's medicine to another child even if the other child has similar symptoms.
- Name of the medicine or the main ingredient.** Make sure this matches what your pediatrician told you. The strength of the medicine (for example, 10-mg tablets) may also be listed.



- d) QTY.** “Quantity” or how much is in the package.
- e) MFG.** “Manufacturer” or who makes the medicine.
- f) Expiration date.** Throw away or flush medicines past this date.
- g) Instructions.** The instructions tell you what condition or symptom is being treated and how your child needs to take the medicine. What your pediatrician tells you should match what is on the label. The following are some examples:

- **“Take full course.”** Make sure your child takes the medicine for as long as directed, even if your child is feeling better.
- **“Take with food.”** Give the medicine to your child after a meal. This is for medicines that work better when the stomach is full.
- **“Take 4 times a day.”** Give the medicine to your child 4 times during the day—for example, at breakfast, lunch, dinner, and before bed. This is different than “take every 4 hours.”
- **“Take every 4 hours.”** Give the medicine to your child every 4 hours. This adds up to 6 times in a 24-hour period. For example, 6:00 am, 10:00 am, 2:00 pm, 6:00 pm, 10:00 pm, and 2:00 am. Most medicines don’t have to be given at the exact time to work, but some do.
- **“Take as needed as symptoms persist.”** Give the medicine to your child when needed.

- h) Refills.** The label will show the number of refills you can get. If “no refills—Dr authorization required” is on the label, you will need to call your pediatrician.
- i) Today’s date.**
- j) Doctor’s name and phone number.**
- k) Pharmacy name and phone number.**

The medicine may have an extra brightly colored safety label that says, for example, “Keep refrigerated,” “Shake well before using,” or “May cause drowsiness.”

Over-the-counter medicines

You can get *over-the-counter (OTC) medicines* without a doctor’s order. This doesn’t mean that OTCs are harmless. Like prescription medicines, OTCs can be very dangerous to a child if not taken the right way. You need to read and understand the instructions before giving OTCs to your child.

The following are common OTCs for children. Talk with your pediatrician before you give your child any medicine.

- **Acetaminophen and ibuprofen (fever reducer or pain reliever).** Can help your child feel better if your child’s head or body aches or he has a fever. They also can help relieve minor pain from bangs and bumps or soreness from a shot. You don’t need to treat a mild fever if your child is playing, drinking fluids, and generally acting well.

A warning about aspirin

Never give aspirin or other salicylates (a type of medicine used to reduce pain or fever) to your child unless your pediatrician tells you it’s safe. Aspirin has been linked to Reye syndrome, a serious and sometimes fatal liver disorder, especially when given to children with the flu or chickenpox. For more information on Reye syndrome or a list of medicines that contain aspirin, contact the National Reye’s Syndrome Foundation at 800/233-7393 or www.reyessyndrome.org.

Acetaminophen and ibuprofen have few side effects and are quite safe if the right dose is given. They come in drops for infants, liquid (syrup or elixir) for toddlers, and chewable tablets for older children. Acetaminophen also comes in suppositories if your child is vomiting and can’t keep down medicine taken by mouth. *Never* give a child aspirin (see “A warning about aspirin”).

Keep in mind that infant drops are *stronger* (more concentrated) than syrup for toddlers. Some parents make the mistake of giving higher doses of infant drops to a toddler, thinking the drops are not as strong. Be sure the type you give your child is appropriate for his weight and age.

Ibuprofen tends to work better than acetaminophen in treating high fevers (103°F or higher). However, ibuprofen should only be given to children older than 6 months. Never give it to a child who is dehydrated or vomiting.

If your child has a kidney disease, asthma, an ulcer, or other chronic illness, ask your pediatrician if ibuprofen is safe for your child. Don’t give your child ibuprofen or acetaminophen if he is taking any other pain reliever or fever reducer, unless your pediatrician says it’s OK.

- **Antihistamines.** Can help your child feel better when he has a runny nose, itchy eyes, and sneezing due to allergies (but not colds). They also can help relieve itching from chickenpox or insect bites. They can even control hives or other allergic reactions. Antihistamines can make some children sleepy. Other children may become irritable, nervous, or restless. For that reason, don’t give an antihistamine at bedtime unless you know your child will have no trouble sleeping.
- **Cough syrups.** Coughing helps clear the lungs of germs and mucus. A cough is “productive” if it sounds like mucus is coming up. This type of cough usually doesn’t need to be treated. However, some coughs may be very dry and keep your child up at night. A humidifier may help loosen your child’s cough. (Be sure to clean the humidifier often to prevent mold and bacteria buildup.) Some cough medicines, called *expectorants*, may also help loosen mucus. Cough *suppressants*, which help calm a cough, should be avoided as coughing helps clear the lungs. Current studies question the effectiveness and safety of cough suppressants, so you should check with your pediatrician before giving your child cough medicines or expectorants. Cough medicine isn’t usually recommended to relieve cough caused by asthma.
- **Cold medicines.** Many cold medicines contain acetaminophen or ibuprofen. Always check the ingredients, especially if you’re giving your child more than one medicine at the same time. If you’re not careful, you could give your child too much of a certain kind of medicine, and it could lead to an overdose.

- **Cortisone/hydrocortisone cream.** Used to treat insect bites, mild skin rashes, poison ivy, and eczema. Ask your pediatrician how often you can apply it and if it's OK to use on your child's face. It should never be used for chickenpox, burns, infections, or open wounds or on broken skin.
- **Decongestant (liquid).** May relieve some cold symptoms. However, they can have many side effects. Children may become irritable, nervous, or restless. Current studies question the effectiveness of decongestants, so check with your pediatrician before giving your child these medicines.
- **Decongestant (nose drops).** Can help make breathing easier. However, they should never be given to an infant because too much of the medicine can be absorbed through the nose. Also, the more they are used, the less they work, and symptoms can return or even get worse. If your older child can't eat or sleep because of a stuffy nose, ask your pediatrician about decongestant nose drops. Don't give your child decongestant nose drops for more than 2 to 3 days unless your pediatrician says it's OK.
- **Saline nose drops.** May help if your child is having trouble eating or sleeping because of a stuffy nose. A bulb syringe may be used to suck out nasal mucus after saline drops are used. Put 1 to 2 drops into a nostril at a time. Use the bulb syringe to suck out the drops and mucus. Using a bulb syringe can irritate your child's nose, so try not to use it too often. If your child is sleeping and eating well, there's no need to treat a stuffy nose.
- **Stomach and intestinal problems medicine.** There are many OTCs for common stomach and intestinal problems such as heartburn, gas, constipation, and diarrhea. Most of these conditions go away by themselves. Sometimes a temporary change in diet helps. Before using any medicines for constipation or diarrhea, talk with your pediatrician. Repeated bouts of diarrhea or chronic constipation can be a sign of a more serious problem.

Remember to let your pediatrician know if your child has any side effects to any medicine.

Taking medicines the right way

For your child's medicine to work, it must be taken as directed. The following are important things to remember:

- **Stick with the schedule.** Don't skip a dose of your child's medicine. Ask your pediatrician or pharmacist what to do if a dose isn't given on time.
- **Give the right amount.** Measure carefully. Don't give your child more medicine because you think it may work better or faster. Giving your child more medicine than is needed may harm her. Follow the directions exactly.
- **Know your child's weight.** With OTCs, check the label to see how much medicine to give based on your child's weight. Age is not always an accurate measure of how much medicine to give your child.
- **Don't stop too soon.** Your child should finish *all* of her prescription medicine, even if she begins to feel better. The same goes for when she doesn't like the taste of the medicine or protests. This is especially true for antibiotics. The infection can come back if the medicine is stopped too soon.
- **Don't try to hide the medicine.** Even though most children's medicines come in flavors to make them taste better, your child may hate the taste and spit it out. It's not a good idea to try to hide the medicine in milk or food. This may affect how the medicine works. Your child may also only eat part of it, or it may settle to the bottom and never get into her mouth. Try giving an older child chewable tablets instead of liquids.

Liquid medicines

Many children's medicines come in liquid form because they are easier to swallow than pills. But they must be used the right way. Parents often misread the directions and give their children too much medicine. This can be very dangerous, especially if given over a period of several days. Always read the instructions carefully. Call your pediatrician if you aren't sure how much medicine to give your child or how often or for how long to give the medicine to your child. Use the measuring device that comes with the medicine (your tablespoons or teaspoons at home are usually not accurate).

- **Dosing spoons.** Works well for older children who can open their mouths and "drink" from the spoon.
- **Medicine cups.** These often come as caps on liquid cold and flu medicines. Make sure to use the cup that comes with the medicine—don't mix and match cups to other products.
- **Syringes and oral droppers.** Works well for infants. Simply squirt the medicine between your child's tongue and the side of her mouth (not the back of the throat). This makes it easier for her to swallow. If you have a syringe with a plastic cap, throw the cap into the trash so that it does not fall off in your child's mouth. Studies have shown that many parents think that the entire syringe or dropper needs to be filled with the medicine. This is not always true. Read the directions carefully and look at the numbers on the side of the dosing device.

Taking medicines safely

You can help prevent overdose or poisoning. The following are important safety tips:

- **Always use good light.** If the room is poorly lit, you may take the wrong medicine or give the wrong dose by mistake.
- **Recheck the label.** Read the label before you open the bottle and again before you give the medicine. Remember, "TBSP" is not the same as "T." TBSP is a *tablespoon*; T or TSP is a *teaspoon*.
- **Use safety caps.** Always use child-resistant caps. Medicines should be stored in a locked, child-proof cabinet.
- **Give the right dose.** Never guess how much to give your child. Also, extra medicine won't make your child feel any better any faster.

What if my child is poisoned?

If you think your child has swallowed any medicines or substances that might be harmful, stay calm and act fast. ***If your child is unconscious, not breathing, or having convulsions or seizures, call 911 or your local emergency number right away.*** If your child doesn't have these symptoms, call the poison center at 1-800-222-1222. A poison expert in your area is available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

Don't use syrup of ipecac. If you have syrup of ipecac in your home, flush it down the toilet and throw away the bottle. Syrup of ipecac is a drug that was used in the past to make children vomit if they swallowed poison. You shouldn't make a child vomit in any way.

- **Use the right measuring device.** Don't use a dosing cup labeled only with ounces if you need to measure the medicine in teaspoons.
- **Watch your child.** Never let your child take medicine by himself. Avoid calling medicine candy.
- **Check the package.** Before using any medicine, always check the package for cuts, tears, or other signs the package was opened.
- **Store your medicines in a cool, dry place.** Medicines can be affected by humidity, so don't store them in your bathroom.

Talk with your pediatrician if you have any questions or concerns about giving your child medicines. Always let your pediatrician know if your child is taking other medicines, if there are any changes in how your child is feeling, or if your child has any reactions to the medicines.

The information contained in this publication should not be used as a substitute for the medical care and advice of your pediatrician. There may be variations in treatment that your pediatrician may recommend based on individual facts and circumstances.

From your doctor

