

Taking Acetaminophen Safely

Introduction

Acetaminophen is an active ingredient used to relieve pain and lower fever.

It is available in more than 600 over-the-counter and prescription medicines. Tylenol®, Excedrin®, and Nyquil® are examples of over-the-counter medicines that contain acetaminophen. Percocet® and Vicodin® are examples of prescription medicines that contain acetaminophen.



Acetaminophen is safe and effective when taken as prescribed or as directed on the over-the-counter medicine label. If you take more acetaminophen than directed, it can be harmful. Acetaminophen can cause serious liver injury.

This reference summary discusses:

- what acetaminophen is used for
- where to look on a medicine label to find out if your medicine contains acetaminophen
- how to take acetaminophen safely
- how to safely give acetaminophen to a child
- why acetaminophen should be used only as directed
- how to prevent medicine accidents
- what to do if someone takes too much acetaminophen
- where you can find more information about acetaminophen

What Acetaminophen is Used For

Acetaminophen temporarily:

- lowers fever
- relieves minor aches and pains

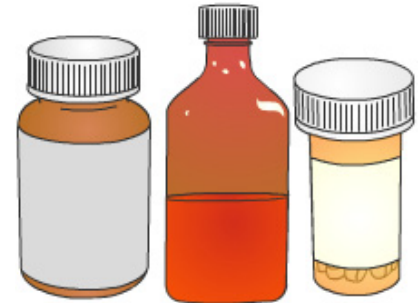


This document is for informational purposes and is not intended to be a substitute for the advice of a doctor or healthcare professional or a recommendation for any particular treatment plan. Like any printed material, it may become out of date over time. It is important that you rely on the advice of a doctor or a healthcare professional for your specific condition.

Acetaminophen is also found in some over-the-counter combination medicines that help treat symptoms associated with colds, flu, allergies, or sleeplessness. In prescription medicines acetaminophen is combined with other active ingredients to help relieve moderate to severe pain.

Where to Look on a Medicine Label to Find Out if Your Medicine Contains Acetaminophen

On over-the-counter medicines “acetaminophen” is written on the medicine’s box or bottle. It appears on both the front and the back of the packaging bolded or highlighted, so that it can be easily seen.

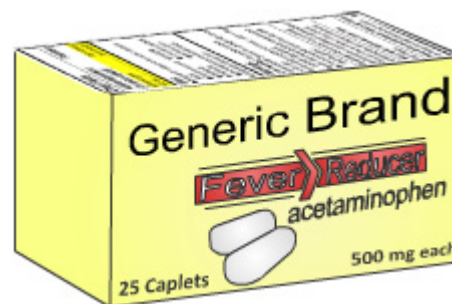


On the back, it appears on a panel called **Drug Facts**. See the section called “Active ingredients”. If your medicine contains acetaminophen, it will be listed here.

Drug Facts	
Active ingredient (in each caplet)	Purpose
Acetaminophen 500mg.....	Pain reliever/fever reducer



On prescription medicine labels, you will find “acetaminophen” listed, or it may appear as an abbreviation such as “APAP”, “acet”, or “acetamin”.



How to Use Acetaminophen Safely

To prevent taking too much acetaminophen, which can cause serious liver injury, you must follow the information given by:

- the **Drug Facts** label
- the prescription medicine label
- your health care professional, such as your pharmacist, doctor, and nurse

Taking too much acetaminophen is harmful.

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Severe liver injury may happen if you:

- take more acetaminophen than directed
- take acetaminophen with other medicines containing acetaminophen
- drink 3 or more alcoholic drinks every day while using acetaminophen



Don't use acetaminophen:

- if you are allergic to acetaminophen or any of the inactive ingredients in the medicine

Don't use 2 different medicines containing acetaminophen.

Ask a doctor before taking acetaminophen if you have liver disease. Taking acetaminophen may be unsafe for you.

Ask a doctor or pharmacist before taking acetaminophen if you are taking the blood thinning drug warfarin, known also by the brand name Coumadin®. Taking acetaminophen may be unsafe for you.



How to Give Acetaminophen Safely to a Child

Acetaminophen is available in medicines made for infants and children.

Medicines that contain acetaminophen and are marketed for infants don't come with directions for children younger than 2 years old. If your child is younger than 2 years old, talk to your child's doctor to see if acetaminophen is the right treatment and how to give it.

To safely give acetaminophen, do the following:

First, check the active ingredients in the other medicines your child is taking or may take to make sure they don't contain acetaminophen.

Never give your child more than one medicine containing acetaminophen.

Follow the information given by your child's doctor.

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Read and follow the information on the over-the-counter **Drug Facts** label or on the prescription medicine label.

For over-the-counter medicines, choose the right medicine based on your child's weight. If you don't know your child's weight, choose by age.

Infant drop medicines can be much stronger than regular children's medicines.

Be sure that your older child is getting the children's formula and not the infant's formula.

The "Directions" section of the **Drug Facts** label tells you:

- if the medicine is right for your child
- how much medicine to give (the dose)
- how to give it
- how many hours you must wait before giving another dose
- when to stop giving it and ask a doctor for help



If a dose for your child's weight or age is not listed on the label, or you can't tell how much to give, ask your pharmacist or doctor what to do.

Warning: This could mean that you have the wrong acetaminophen product for your child.

Use the measuring tool that comes with the medicine. It will give the exact dose. If you don't have the right measuring tool, ask a pharmacist.

Never use a spoon that's meant to be used for cooking or eating to give medicine to a child. These spoons are all different sizes and you shouldn't use them because they can give the wrong amount.



How to Prevent Accidentally Giving Too Much Acetaminophen to Your Child

Keep a daily record of the medicine your child has taken. This is very important if more than one person is caring for your child - for instance, you and your spouse or a baby sitter.

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Write:

- the medicine name
- the times of the day your child took the medicine
- the dose your child received

Make sure you share the daily record with the other caregivers. This will help avoid accidents, like mistakenly giving:

- an extra dose
- another medicine containing acetaminophen

Keep medicine where it can't be seen or reached by children and pets. A locked box, cabinet, or closet is best.



What to Do if Someone Gets Too Much Acetaminophen

Too much acetaminophen could mean:

- if a child accidentally swallows a medicine without supervision
- if a child gets the wrong formula
- if a child gets a second dose of acetaminophen too soon
- if a person takes more medicine than directed
- if a person takes more than one medicine that contains acetaminophen

Don't wait! Call 9-1-1 or Poison Control at 1-800-222-1222 to find out what to do even if the person doesn't feel differently or sick.

Symptoms of liver injury may not be noticeable for days. If you wait, the liver injury may become more severe and may lead to liver failure or even death.



Summary & Where to Get More Information

Acetaminophen is an effective active ingredient in hundreds of medicines for relieving pain and reducing fever.

Most people can use it safely when they follow the directions given on the medicine label or from a health care professional.

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But, if you don't use acetaminophen as directed, it can cause serious liver injury or other harmful effects such as interacting with your other medicines.

Always follow the directions on the medicine label.

If you have questions talk to your doctor, nurse, or pharmacist.

You can visit the FDA at www.fda.gov/acetaminophen

Or, contact FDA at:

- 1-888-INFO-FDA
- druginfo@fda.hhs.gov



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