



THE SELF HEALTH HANDBOOK

A Consumer's Guide to
Over-the-Counter Drugs
Prescription Drugs
Cosmetics
Contraceptives
Herbs & Home Remedies:
How They Work
& How to Use Them
by BRENT Q. HAFEN

A SPECTRUM BOOK



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THE SELF- HEALTH HANDBOOK

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preface

For too many of us, medicine is shrouded in mystery. We wake up one morning with vague and mysterious symptoms. When that happens, we can either call a doctor or treat ourselves.

If we decide to see a doctor, we often find that from the time we enter the office until we leave with a prescription and have it filled by a pharmacist, we never understand fully exactly what we have, what caused it, or what we're taking to cure it. If we decide to treat ourselves with the ointments, pills, and capsules in our medicine cabinets, we might take something that cures us—but we could also harm or even kill ourselves.

This book has been written to take some of that mystery out of medicine, to help you understand drugs and how they work, how safe they are, which medicines can be taken under which conditions, and how to save money on prescriptions. It will also familiarize you with things you use every day—both medications and nonmedicinal items such as soap, shampoo, cosmetics, mouthwashes, and so on—and what you should have on hand.

Once you become acquainted with over-the-counter and prescription drugs, you'll know when it's safe to treat yourself and when you should consult a physician. Once the mystery is gone, you'll be able to take an active part in the care and well-being of your own body.

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contents

preface, v

part one: OVER-THE-COUNTER DRUGS

- 1** using otc drugs, 3
- 2** colds, coughs, and the flu, 12
- 3** constipation, diarrhea, and hemorrhoids, 30
- 4** pain, 52
- 5** indigestion, 68
- 6** burns and sunburns, 79
- 7** other ailments, 91

part two: PRESCRIPTION DRUGS

- 8** reading your prescription, 119
- 9** how the doctor prescribes, 125

- 10** selecting a pharmacist, 132
- 11** common prescriptions, 143

part three: **COSMETICS**

- 12** using cosmetics safely, 157
- 13** dental hygiene, 161
- 14** skin care, 172
- 15** acne, 182
- 16** hair care, 193

part four: **NONMEDICINAL TREATMENTS**

- 17** home remedies, 205
- 18** herbs, 211
- 19** vitamins and minerals, 232
- 20** other nutritional treatments, 259

part five: **THE USE OF DRUGS**

- 21** drug action and hazards, 273
- 22** oral contraceptives, 287
- 23** drugs and pregnancy, 298
- 24** drugs and children, 314
- chapter notes, 323
- index, 339

part one

OVER-THE- COUNTER DRUGS

1

using otc drugs

Over-the-counter (OTC) drugs—drugs that can be purchased without a prescription—are the most widely used in the country today. In fact, in 1977, \$4 billion was spent on over-the-counter remedies.¹ The table that follows shows the breakdown of how much money was spent for which type of remedy.² Even those who do not visit a doctor regularly or who never have a prescription filled are likely to purchase and use over-the-counter drugs (the most common of which is aspirin) to get relief from headache, indigestion, constipation, mild aches and pain, skin irritations, or sleeplessness.

HOW MUCH AMERICANS SPENT ON OTC MEDICATIONS IN 1977

| ITEM | DOLLARS SPENT |
|---|------------------------|
| Cough and cold remedies | \$ 843,520,000 |
| Pain killers (internal) | 832,490,000 |
| Vitamins | 519,580,000 |
| Antacids | 459,290,000 |
| Laxatives | 273,090,000 |
| Pain killers (external) | 147,700,000 |
| Antiseptics (external) | 83,880,000 |
| Contraceptives | 66,820,000 |
| All others (burn remedies, eye washes, hemorrhoidal preparations, sleeping aids, etc.) | 1,132,600,000 |
| <i>Total</i> | \$4,358,970,000 |

Currently, thousands of over-the-counter drugs are on the market.³ But just because you can get them without a prescription is no reason to believe that they are harmless or that they should be used any time or all the time. The reason is that nonprescription drugs generally treat *symptoms*, that is, the changes from your normal healthy state that indicate something is wrong with your health. If you hide symptoms too long, you may think your health is restored. Actually, all you are doing is preventing your body from warning you of a possibly serious problem. Some OTC drugs are safe and beneficial in relieving minor symptoms, but none can ever “cure” disease—they only relieve the *symptoms*. The continuation of those symptoms is a sign that you should seek medical attention and that you will probably need a prescription medication. The improper or prolonged use of over-the-counter drugs may only aggravate your symptoms or even hide a condition that needs to be brought to the attention of your doctor.

PRECAUTIONS

Before we consider specific over-the-counter drugs and their effects, you should know several ways to protect yourself when dealing with OTC drugs in general.

1. *Get into the habit of reading labels.* The label tells you all you need to know. Read the drug's label carefully, and make sure the drug is the right one for your symptoms. You could avoid a serious complication or reaction by simply studying the ingredient listing; be especially careful if you know you have allergies. By law, labels on over-the-counter drugs must list the complete ingredients. To be a wise consumer, you should also be aware that federal law requires the following information on all OTC drug labels:

- *The name of the product*, along with the name and address of the manufacturer, distributor, or packer.
- *The active ingredients.* Some ingredients in medication are *inactive*; that is, they serve only to make the product a liquid or gel, to color it, to flavor it, or to do something that has no direct effect on healing or relieving symptoms. *Active ingredients* are the ones that actually help you—or harm you, if used improperly. This information is valuable for those with allergies. Also, by checking the active ingredients, you may be able to buy an identical product for less.
- *Directions for safe use.*

4 using otc drugs

- *Cautions or warnings.* These caution you about such things as driving or operating machinery while taking the drug. They also warn about how long you should take the drug before seeing your doctor. A typical warning might read, “If symptoms persist for more than 24 hours, see your doctor.”

2. *Follow directions.* The label on the bottle or tube contains important information regarding who can take the drug, the conditions under which the drug can be taken, whether it is safe to drive your car when you are taking the drug, and whether the drug is safe for children. If a leaflet is tucked inside the drug’s box, read and study the leaflet also. Then make sure you follow the directions *exactly*—including, of course, dosage information.

Driving is a particular problem. We all know that we shouldn’t drink and drive, but it’s just as important that we do not “drug and drive,” especially on nonprescription drugs. Most of the pills, tablets, and capsules in your medicine chest—including aspirin, cold tablets, and allergy medication—can have definite adverse effects on your vision, your ability to concentrate, your coordination, and your judgment.⁴ Whenever your doctor prescribes a drug, you have the opportunity to ask if it’s safe to drive while you’re using it. Whenever you buy and use a nonprescription drug, it’s up to you to find out about its safety. Read the label—it usually tells you. And follow *all* directions on the label; it’s foolish to take too many pills at once, to take them more often than you should, or to combine several drugs unless you know they are safe. If you can’t figure out a label, call your doctor or pharmacist; they are happy to advise you.

Even after you have discerned that a drug is safe to use while driving, it’s smart to find out how you react to the drug before you hit the road. Observe your own reaction. Each person reacts differently to a given drug, and your own reaction is based on a lot of things: your general health, your state of mind, your own chemical makeup, and the foods you have eaten today. If you start feeling lightheaded, dizzy, shaky, sleepy, or if your vision blurs while you are driving, pull over to the side of the road or take the nearest exit. Rest until you feel better. If you have to, call home and arrange for someone to come and get you. If you manifest any such symptoms before you set out, take a taxi or bus instead, or find a ride with someone else.

Finally, there’s no substitute for sleep. Too many people try to drive long distances on too little sleep, using the various stay-awake pills that are available on the market. The major ingredient in those pills is caffeine, which won’t kill you but which can give you a severely upset stomach if you get too much of it—making it hard for you to

concentrate on your driving. And if you get motion sickness, the medication you need for that makes you drowsy too. Pull off the road and sleep, or let someone else drive. Driving takes acute concentration and the ability to make split-second decisions—which often spell the difference between life and death.

3. *Keep advertising in the proper perspective.* Before you buy an OTC drug, ask yourself whether you really need it. Or have you been convinced that you “need” it by a TV commercial, a friendly neighbor, or a magazine or newspaper? We’ve all seen commercials on television for products that promise instant relief from stomach gas, constipation, or headache. Use your common sense: Don’t buy a drug to treat a problem you don’t really have, don’t expect instant cures, and don’t require more from the drug than you can reasonably expect it to deliver. Remember: No drug can make you look younger, make you lose weight, or relieve a headache in two minutes.

4. *Ask questions.* If you are confused or unsure about which product to buy, ask a pharmacist for a recommendation. Pharmacists cannot legally diagnose disease or prescribe prescription medication, but they can (and will) advise you about over-the-counter drugs. If they tell you to see a doctor, take the advice. If you are unable to consult a pharmacist, call your doctor; he or she will be happy to advise you concerning the effectiveness of over-the-counter medications.

5. *Be extremely wary about mixing medications.* Before you take more than one drug at a time, ask your doctor about the consequences of mixing the medications. Some drugs just don’t mix; others can create serious—even fatal—reactions. For instance, a man with a heart disease who regularly takes blood-thinning medication can die of hemorrhage shortly after taking two aspirin for a headache: The aspirin can further the blood-thinning action of the heart medication. More commonly, you might need to treat a combination of symptoms—typical among flu victims—and you might consider taking several over-the-counter drugs at the same time to relieve the symptoms. Ask your doctor or pharmacist first to make sure the drugs are compatible.

6. *Don’t drink alcohol and use other drugs simultaneously.* Alcohol is a drug. Sleeping pills and antihistamines are only two of the drugs that result in extreme drowsiness when combined with alcohol; in some cases, coma results.

7. *Protect children from drugs.* If you have children, keep medications out of their reach—either in a high, inaccessible cabinet or in a

locked cupboard or drawer. Also, check for safety packaging whenever you buy medications of any kind. Ask pharmacists to package the drugs that they dispense in child-proof packaging; when buying over-the-counter drugs, choose the ones with child-proof caps.

8. *Don't change packaging without consulting your pharmacist.* Some drugs are packaged in a certain way to preserve their potency and freshness. If you transfer the drug to a different bottle or container, you might destroy its potency. Your pharmacist can tell you whether you can safely switch containers.

9. *Stop taking the drug immediately if you suffer from adverse reactions.* Most labels can help you determine what the possible adverse reactions might be. So read the label, and pay attention to what your body is trying to tell you. If the reaction is particularly serious, you should consult your doctor.

10. *Be careful that you don't overdose.* Over-the-counter drugs that are completely safe in normal doses may cause kidney disease, enzyme imbalance, or even accidental poisoning and death if taken in large doses. Follow the directions carefully.

11. *Report your suspicions about a possible problem drug.* If you have a bad experience with an OTC drug, call the local office of the Food and Drug Administration. (The offices are listed in the telephone directory under "United States Government, Department of Health, Education, and Welfare.") Drugs that don't seem right or that cause unexpected or bizarre reactions may have been manufactured improperly, and federal law provides for the inspection and regulation of over-the-counter drugs.

12. *Learn how to take medication, that is, how to "deliver" it.* Know the most common forms of delivery for OTC drugs, as well as the correct way to use an OTC product. These guidelines may help you:⁵

- *Tablets and capsules:* Swallow a mouthful of water or wet the inside of the mouth with water before taking the medication. Place the capsule on the back of the tongue, and then drink water.
- *Liquids:* The problem with liquids is that some people do not read the labels to be sure they are getting the proper dosage. Also, they do not use a uniform measuring implement to take the medication. How many different-sized spoons do you have at your house? Pharmacists can help you solve this problem. Ask them to give you a special measuring spoon so that you are taking the same

dosage of the product at all times. Also remember to shake the medication thoroughly. Some liquids have a tendency to separate; in other words, the doses that come off the top of the bottle may be less potent than those at the bottom.

- *Powders*: Sprinkle the product evenly on the affected area making sure that you do not inhale any of the powder.
- *Ointments and creams*: Apply these products as thinly as possible, and massage them into the skin until there is no trace. If you have especially dry skin, moisten or immerse the skin before applying the ointment or cream.
- *Aerosol sprays*: Shake the product thoroughly. Hold the container upright about 4 to 6 inches from the area. Press the nozzle for several seconds, and then release. Do not use the spray near your face or eyes.
- *Eye drops*: Wash your hands before applying drops. Lie or sit down, and tilt your head back. Pull the lower lid down to form a pouch. Hold the dropper close to your eye, but do not touch it. Drop the liquid into the pouch (not directly onto the eyeball—the medicine will be blinked out). Close your eyes, and keep them closed for a few minutes.
- *Eardrops*: Tilt the head to the side, with the affected ear up. Grasp the ear lobe, and pull it back. Do not touch the ear canal with the dropper. The drops should be neither too cool nor too warm. A good way to bring them to a comfortable temperature is to roll the bottle back and forth between your hands. Never warm them in boiling water; they should not be too warm.
- *Nose drops and sprays*: Before applying either product, gently blow your nose. To apply drops, tilt your head back and put the drops into the nose without touching the nasal linings with the applicator. Keep your head tilted back, and sniff gently. For nasal sprays, keep your head in an upright position. Insert the applicator into your nose, trying not to touch the linings. Squeeze the container and sniff the medication into the nose at the same time. Keep squeezing the bottle until you withdraw it from your nose so that mucous and bacteria are not sucked into the sprayer. The problem with sprays and drops is that bacteria can build up and multiply in the container, causing more serious effects than the original problems. So do not use someone else's nasal spray or drops. Do not use any nasal drops or spray longer than one week from one bottle.

13. *Make sure all OTC drugs in your possession are fresh and potent.* On a regular basis, clean out your medicine cabinet and throw away the drugs that you have had on hand for more than a year. (A good method of disposal is flushing the drugs down the toilet—children may find a handful of attractive tablets in a trash can and mistake them for candy.)

14. *Just as foods can interfere with the results of clinical laboratory tests, so can certain common prescription and over-the-counter drugs.* Tests results have been upset by antibiotics, tranquilizers, aspirin, laxatives, cough and cold remedies, oral contraceptives, and vitamins. These medications can give a “false positive” or “false negative” reading in tests. Certain changes can also occur such as physical changes (such as a change in the color of urine) and biological changes (changes in the electrolyte concentration of blood and urine for example).⁶

Finally, you will be able to use over-the-counter drugs intelligently if you learn the symptoms and illnesses they treat, the symptoms of common illnesses, how the drugs work, and which brands are most effective.

SUPPLYING YOUR MEDICINE CABINET

Before going into detail throughout the other chapters in *part one*, we recommend taking a close look at the contents of your medicine cabinet. Is it ready for an emergency? You might check the contents of your cabinet with the OTC medications listed below.⁷ Be sure to come back to this table to reevaluate the list after you have read the section on OTC drugs.

- Aspirin, used to reduce fever, reduce swelling, and relieve pain; should not be used by those with gastrointestinal disease or allergy.
- Band-Aids.
- Caladryl Lotion, used for skin irritations.
- Bandages and compresses.
- Di-Gel liquid, used to combat gas and acid indigestion.
- Fleet Enema, for severe constipation.
- Neosporin ointment, on minor skin abrasions that could lead to infection.

- Robitussin CF Syrup or some other cough syrup you have found effective and safe in treating your own cough.
- Tylenol, or some other nonaspirin pain reliever.
- Vaseline.
- Nose drops or spray.
- Cold medication you have found safe and effective.
- Milk of Magnesia, for constipation.
- Kaopectate, for diarrhea.
- Eye drops, if you suffer from frequent eye irritations due to pollutants in the air or glare from sun or snow.
- Syrup of Ipecac, used to induce vomiting in cases of accidental poisoning.
- Sunscreen lotion.
- An antacid you have found safe and effective.
- Adhesive tape.
- Elastic bandages.
- Iodine, hydrogen peroxide, or rubbing alcohol, to use as an antiseptic for mild abrasions or cuts.
- Some type of gargle or mouthwash for relief of throat symptoms.
- An antihistamine compound for allergies.
- Moisturizing creams and lotions for dry skin.
- Hemorrhoid preparations.
- Baking soda.

BEING YOUR OWN DOCTOR

When you take nonprescription drugs, you are responsible for what happens because you are the one in control. You decide occasionally—with the help of your doctor—that you need to take the medication to begin with. You stand in the aisle at the pharmacy or drugstore, surrounded by neat little rows of brightly colored boxes, tubes, and bottles. You choose what to buy. And you take the medicine for yourself.

When you do so, you join a large segment of this country's population. For every American who sees a doctor, three treat themselves, usually with over-the-counter drugs. In any two-day period, 40 percent