



THE BASICS

Over-the-counter Drugs

Do you know?

- Over-the-counter drugs (OTC) are drugs bought without a doctor's prescription at a pharmacy, grocery store and, in some cases, at a convenience store. While they are called over-the-counter, a person does not normally have to ask the pharmacist for the drug. The products are usually accessible in the front part of the pharmacy or store.
- Over-the-counter drugs can be bought to manage symptoms related to cough, cold or allergy symptoms, motion sickness, sleep problems, minor pain (i.e. headaches), weight issues or to help people with proper body functions, such as going to the washroom. As well, there are a number of herbal medicines a person can buy to relieve these types of symptoms.
- Over-the-counter drugs are generally safe and can help relieve the symptoms a person is experiencing if they are used according to the directions on the package. However, these drugs can also be abused and can cause serious health consequences if they are not used as they are intended.
- These drugs are increasingly used by young people to get high. It is easy to buy the drugs, as they can be bought legally by anyone in drug stores, grocery stores and some convenience stores. These medications are also not as expensive as street drugs, making them attractive to young people.
- A person must take a lot of any one of these drugs to get high. In some cases, individuals might take a whole box of the medicine instead of one or two pills as the directions indicate.
- Examples of these abused medications are Gravol®, Benadryl®, Tylenol PM®, Excedrin PM®, Robitussin®, Vicks Nyquil®, Vicks Formula 44® and Coricidin®. There are many similar drugs available.

- There are no laws against purchasing these drugs; however, it is illegal to use any substance for the purpose of getting high.

Short-term Effects

Each of these medications has specific effects; however, if people take large doses, effects may include drowsiness, dizziness, and problems with physical coordination and judgment. They may experience numbness (lack of feeling) in certain parts of their body, nausea or vomiting, racing heart and increased blood pressure.

Taking a lot of pills intended for motion sickness can cause hallucinations. Taking sleep aids excessively will cause extreme tiredness and may lead to ongoing sleep problems even after the person has stopped taking the drug.

Occasionally, severe respiratory depression and a lack of oxygen to the brain can occur from taking too much of these medications. This is potentially life-threatening. Mixing any of these medications with alcohol or other drugs can lead to very serious complications, including death.

Long-term Effects

Taking any of these drugs over a long period of time can result in depression, confusion, loss of energy, vomiting, and difficulty thinking and socializing. Feeling extremely tired during the daytime, losing coordination and a reduced ability to learn are also complications from taking these medicines over an extended period of time.

Tolerance & Dependence

Regular users of over-the-counter drugs can develop psychological dependence (they feel they need it) and physical dependence (the body needs it).

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Tolerance (the need for more of the drug to get the desired effect) can also occur. This means larger doses are needed to achieve similar effects as those experienced when first taking the drug. This may lead users to take higher doses and risk an overdose.

Withdrawal Symptoms

Depending on the type of over-the-counter drug used, withdrawal symptoms, such as excitability, agitation, weakness, clumsiness, discomfort, poor appetite, stomach cramps, nausea and hostility, may be experienced.

Some of these drugs can have dangerous side effects if stopped suddenly after long term use. Seeking the advice of a doctor or pharmacist on how to stop taking the drugs is very important.

Other Risks

- Use of any drug in combination with alcohol can be dangerous and potentially fatal.
- Certain over-the-counter drugs taken for a long time or in very large amounts can cause liver problems and other serious health problems that can lead to death (i.e. acetaminophen/Tylenol®).
- Excessive use of any of these drugs can lead to reduced coordination and judgment and can reduce a person's ability to react appropriately while performing activities such as driving.
- People who abuse drugs of any kind may create issues for themselves related to the law, their financial situation and family relationships.
- Excessive use of over-the-counter drugs during pregnancy can potentially cause problems for both the mother and the baby and should be avoided. Consultation with a health care professional is important before use of any medication during pregnancy or breastfeeding.
- People can put themselves in risky situations when using over-the-counter drugs (driving while high, having unprotected sex, taking unsafe actions which could cause injury to themselves or others).
- If the user is allergic to any of the drugs in these medications, dangerous allergic reactions can occur that could lead to death.

- Sharing needles can lead to infections, such as human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) and hepatitis.

Substance Use & Mental Health

Substance use and mental health problems can often occur together. This is commonly referred to as a co-occurring disorder.

- Substance use may increase the risk of mental health problems.
- People with mental health problems are at higher risk of developing substance abuse problems:
 - Sometimes they use alcohol and other drugs in an attempt to relieve themselves from mental health symptoms.
 - For most people alcohol and other substance use only covers up the symptoms and may make them worse.

REMEMBER: A person's experience with any drug can vary. Here are a few of the many things that may affect the experience: the amount and strength of the drug taken, the setting, a person's mood and expectations before taking the drug, gender, overall health, past experience with that drug and whether more than one drug is being used at the same time. Using alcohol and other drugs at the same time can also be dangerous.

Sources and For More Information

Fast Facts on Drugs, AFM, 2004.

Alberta Health Services Website: <http://www.aadac.com>

Drug Abuse Help Website:
<http://www.drugabusehelp.com>

National Highway Traffic Safety Administration Website:
<http://www.nhtsa.dot.gov>

National Institute on Drug Abuse Website:
<http://www.nida.nih.gov>

Parents – The Anti Drug Website:
<http://www.theantidrug.com>

Teen Drug Abuse Website: <http://www.teendrugabuse.us>

The Addictions Foundation of Manitoba (AFM) offers a broad range of prevention and treatment services for alcohol, other drugs and gambling. These are designed to meet the needs of all Manitobans and include harm reduction and abstinence-based programs.

For more information, contact your local AFM office or visit the website at www.afm.mb.ca.

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