



Drug FAQs for Members

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Safe Use of Acetaminophen

What is acetaminophen?

- Acetaminophen is a generic name for the medicine in products such as Tylenol.
- Acetaminophen is used for pain and fever, but it does not reduce inflammation.
- Acetaminophen is less irritating to the stomach than some other over-the-counter (OTC) pain medications such as aspirin or ibuprofen.

What products contain acetaminophen?

- Acetaminophen is found both as a single medicine (e.g. Tylenol, APAP) and in combination with other medicines (e.g. Excedrin PM, Midol) in many products.
- Products containing acetaminophen are available OTC and on prescription (e.g. Vicodin, Percocet, Fioricet).

Are there safety concerns with acetaminophen?

- Yes, taking too much acetaminophen can damage your liver and kidneys.
- Acetaminophen is usually cleared from your body by your liver to nontoxic compounds. If you take too much acetaminophen and your liver cannot clear it all the extra acetaminophen has to be cleared in another way. This other way creates a compound that is toxic.
- Symptoms of acetaminophen toxicity are loss of appetite, nausea, vomiting, abdominal pain, a general feeling of discomfort, confusion, yellowing of the skin and eyes and coma. Severe cases of acetaminophen toxicity can cause death.
- If you suspect an acetaminophen overdose contact the National Capital Poison Center at 1-800-222-1222 immediately.

How much acetaminophen is too much?

- **For Adults:** FOUR grams (4000 mg) of acetaminophen in a 24-hour period is the maximum recommended dose. Usually, adults can take one to two 325 mg tablets, every four to six hours as needed.
 - For OLDER adults (>75 years): THREE grams (3000 mg) of acetaminophen in a 24-hour period is the maximum recommended dose.
 - For adults with LIVER problems or those who drink more than 3 alcoholic drinks per day: TWO grams (2000 mg) per day is the maximum dose.
- **For Children < 12 years:** 10-15 mg/kg/dose PO every 4-6 hours as needed; do not exceed 5 doses in 24 hours.

Are there special concerns for children?

- Children are at special risk of getting too much acetaminophen.
- The dose for children changes as they grow older. Check the labels on your child's medications to see which ones contain acetaminophen.
- Some products are more concentrated than others, which means you need a smaller amount for a dose.
- Do not give young children adult-strength acetaminophen.

Safety tips for patients and caregivers:

- Follow the instructions on the bottle carefully.
- Pay attention to acetaminophen dosages, frequency of administration and formulation.
- Avoid taking more than one product containing acetaminophen. Many OTC cough and cold products contain acetaminophen.
- Check with your pharmacist or doctor before combining medications and ask about appropriate doses for your children.