

Talking about over-the-counter medication safety

A guide for parents and caregivers of pre-teens and teens

Pre-teens and teens can benefit from being taught to take responsibility for their own over-the-counter (OTC) medication use. This guide will help you equip your child with information and skills to use medications safely, now and in the future.

Before starting the conversation

Reflect on your own OTC medication knowledge

As a parent, you have a big influence on what your child knows. You don't have to be an expert to help your child learn about safe medication use and the importance of asking questions and finding information from trusted sources, such as your pharmacist and doctor.

Start by reflecting on your own knowledge and thoughts about OTC medication. Ask yourself these questions:

- How do I decide when to take medication and what medication to take?
- How confident do I feel reading a medication label? Do I know where to find information about what is in the medication, or when and how I can use the medication safely? Use the [How to read an over-the-counter medication label](#) resource to learn more.
- Where do I get information about possible side effects or risks of OTC medications?
- In what situations would I reach out to my doctor or pharmacist about OTC medications?

Be aware of yourself as a role model

Your kids are watching and listening to you, even if you think they aren't. As a parent, you can show your child safe and responsible medication use through how you use and speak about medications. To help you reflect on how you model safe OTC medication use, consider:

- How do you and others in your household talk about OTC medications?
- What messages might your child be picking up from the way you use or talk about OTC medications?
- What habits do you have around storing medications?
- What habits do you have around checking the medication label for instructions and expiry dates?

Tips for talking with your child about safe OTC medication use

Talking openly about OTC medications with your child can help you understand when and how they might use OTC medications and how you can support them to use these products safely.

Here are a few tips that can help set the tone for honest, open conversation:

- Remember: You know your child best. Approach the conversation in a way that you feel they will be receptive to.
- Think about your goals for the conversation. For example, you may hope to understand how your child thinks about OTC medications and provide them with guidance on using products safely.
- Find an opportunity to talk when you are both calm and in a receptive headspace. Doing activities together, such as driving, going for a walk or doing chores together, can be good times for these conversations.
- Use a non-judgmental and caring tone. Your child is more likely to be open to the conversation if they feel respected and understood.
- Ask them open-ended questions and be curious about their thoughts to avoid the conversation feeling like a lecture. Encourage your child's questions and answer them honestly.
- Focus on facts over feelings. The goal is not to scare your child out of using medications. Aim instead to empower them with the knowledge they need to use OTC medication safely.
- Emphasize that it's important to you that they are healthy, happy and making choices that will keep them safe.

Day-to-day moments can be learning opportunities. For example, if you are taking a medication, take a moment to show your child where you look on the package to find how much you can take safely and when you can take more if you need to.



Start with a question

To open the conversation, consider talking about:

- Which OTC medications they use, how often and why
- How they decide when to take OTC medications
- Where they get OTC medications from (e.g., Do they have their own bottle of medication in their backpack or bedroom? Do they ever share medications with friends?)
- What they know about the side effects or risks of taking OTC medications
- Where they go for information (other than you) if they have questions about medications

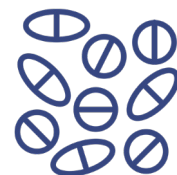
Remind them of what's important

Talk about why it's important to use OTC medications safely. OTC medications can have risks just like prescription medications even though they are easier to access. Taking too much medication, mixing medications or using medications in ways they are not meant to be used can be dangerous.

Show them what information is on a medication label, where to find it and what it means. Emphasize the importance of checking and following the instructions every time you use medication, including:

- how old you should be to take the medication
- how much medication to take at once
- how often to take the medication
- how much of the medication can be taken safely in one day (24 hours)

Consider asking your child an action-based question to get a better sense of their understanding. For example, “Before taking a medication, what steps would you take to make sure it’s safe for you?”



Make a plan together

Make a plan together for how and when your child will use medications. For example, you might agree that they will check with you before taking any OTC medications. This can look different depending on what is appropriate for your child and change as your child grows more independent.

Together you can ensure they are taking the right medication at the right dosage. If your child takes prescription medications, it's important to be aware that OTC medications can change how prescription medications work.

As part of your plan, you can also make sure that all medications in the home are stored away safely after each use and that expired medications are taken back to the pharmacy for safe disposal.

Talk about safe sources

Talk to your child about trusted sources of information about OTC medications, such as you, a doctor and a pharmacist. You can also talk about sources that may not give safe and accurate information.

Talk about where it is safe to get OTC medications from and where it isn't. Explain that they should not share medications with others, and why.

Viral social media challenges and medication

While many social media challenges can be silly fun or raise awareness, there have been challenges encouraging teens to take dangerous amounts of medication. Be aware of what apps your child is using and the kind of content they are seeing.

Explore with your child:

- What kind of content they see on social media about OTC medications
- How their friends or peers talk about social media challenges
- What they can do if they feel pressured to do a challenge
- What we see and don't see on social media (for example, we see a person's likes and views but may not see that they got sick, hurt, or worse)
- How serious is safe OTC medication use in their opinion

Learn more about social media safety from the [Canadian Paediatric Society](#)

For more information visit parachute.ca/teensandmedication

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