

House Calls

Please Talk to Me

By Rikki Schuster, PA-C

While attending a recent continuing medical education conference, I was reminded of a common and potentially serious medical concern that many people rarely think about. I want to pass on to you the importance of communication between you and your medical provider when it comes to over the counter medications and supplements you may be taking.

Acetaminophen (popular brand name Tylenol) used for fever and pain, has had a lot of press lately concerning its safety. We've all used this drug on ourselves for a headache or our children for a fever without any complications. It's an excellent pain reliever, and it brings down our child's fever usually without any complications. The problem occurs with this drug when you take it for your headache, then you take a multi-symptom cold medicine that also has the same drug in it, then you take it again to lower your temperature, and before you know it you have taken three times the amount you should. When this happens repeatedly, your liver isn't able to break it down, causing the level of medication to become toxic. Extreme toxic levels can cause irreversible liver damage, and sometimes death. Unfortunately this happens often with the dosing of children, because a teaspoon of infant formula is twice as concentrated as the same amount of children's formula. The importance of reading the labels for the proper dosage, following the directions on the package, and asking your medical provider for help when you are in doubt is paramount.

Non-Steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) like ibuprofen (popular brand names Motrin, Advil, Aleve) is another medication that is over the counter, excellent for strains and sprains, but can often be overused. If you take more than what is recommended for a period of time that is longer than recommended, you can have serious complications such as kidney damage, or internal bleeding. Mixing these medications with other medications like aspirin can make the side effects even more prevalent. If your provider prescribes you an NSAID, you should not mix that with an

over the counter NSAID unless specifically instructed by that prescribing practitioner.

What might be the most common mistake patients make when talking to their medical provider is failing to mention their nutritional supplements or vitamins that they may be taking. Some people might feel embarrassed to mention what they are trying at home attempt to heal themselves for fear their provider won't understand. However, it is imperative that you disclose any and all nutritional supplements that you may be consuming in order to avoid drug-drug interactions and potentially life threatening situations. This is especially important for those people that take daily heart or cholesterol lowering medications prescribed by your medical professional. There are many over the counter supplements that can block the metabolism of the prescription medications which can cause harmful levels of the drug and in turn potentially cause irreversible damage. Your provider should always ask you what medications you are taking prior to them prescribing you a medication themselves. You must consider your herbal supplements and vitamins as a medication and inform your provider to avoid an unfortunate drug interaction. If you are prescribed a drug you are unfamiliar with, ask questions such as if you should take it with food, or are there foods or drinks I should avoid while taking this medication. Your pharmacist is a good resource for these types of questions as well. Being an informed consumer, reading labels, and keeping open lines of communication with your medical provider are all the best ways to steer clear of avoidable medicine mishaps.

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