Cold and Flu Medicines: Where is the line between relief and risk?

Last year, over 56,700 people called a poison center because they were experiencing unintended adverse effects from their over-the-counter (OTC) cold and flu medications. Over 21,000 of those calls were about children under age 6. Many people believe that since OTC medications are available without a prescription, they are harmless.

When used properly, OTC medicines can help keep us healthy, make us feel better when we are sick, and help us heal faster. However, they are not without risk. “There are three common mistakes people make with their OTC medicines,” says Brenda Beech, RN, and certified specialist in poison information at the Blue Ridge Poison Center. “They may take the wrong product. They may take too much of the same ingredient. Or they may combine products which react poorly together. These mistakes can all be avoided if you take a few moments to read the drug facts label.”

By law, every OTC product must display a drug facts label. This is where you find information about when to use the product, how to use the product, who should avoid the product, and how much of the product you should take. Always keep your medicine in its original packaging so that you have this important safety information on hand.

“They’re doing WHAT?” Responding to the ‘Tide pod challenge’

Search the term “Tide Pod Challenge” on YouTube and over 24,000 videos pop up. The videos largely show young people biting into single-load liquid laundry packets and then gagging, spitting, crying out in pain, even vomiting. It looks like a horrible experience; and yet teens and young adults are taking the dare and trying it anyway. Is it all just foolish— but harmless— fun? “No,” say the
Knowing how to read the drug facts label is an important step in making sure you use medicines safely. The American Association of Poison Control Centers teamed up with McNeil Consumer Healthcare and Scholastic to create an educational program about OTC medicine safety. The program is available online at [http://www.scholastic.com/otc-med-safety/](http://www.scholastic.com/otc-med-safety/). It features sections for families, for healthcare providers, and for teachers.

From the program, here are some of the key sections on the drug facts label and what they mean:

### Drug Facts

**Active Ingredients**

- Medicine 100 mg: cough suppressant
- Medicine 150 mg: nasal decongestant

Uses: Temporarily relieves:
- Coughing due to minor throat and bronchial irritation
- Nasal congestion

Warnings:

- Do not use if you have ever had an allergic reaction to this product or any of its ingredients.
- Ask a doctor before use if you have liver or kidney disease. Your doctor should determine if you need a different dose.

DIRECTIONS:

- Tablet melts in mouth. Can be taken with or without water.

### Active Ingredients

The ingredients that make the medicine work. Many cold and flu products contain a combination of active ingredients, such as decongestants, antihistamines, cough suppressants, and pain relievers. Read the label: you may be taking the same ingredient more than once if you take more than one medicine. This could be dangerous.

### WARNINGS

Safety information including side effects, the questions you should ask a doctor before taking the medicine, and which medicines to avoid using at the same time.

### USES

Describes the symptoms that the medicine treats. Choose an OTC product that treats only the symptoms you are experiencing. For example: if you don’t have a stuffy nose, don’t take an OTC medicine that contains a decongestant; you don’t need it.

### DIRECTIONS

Indicates the amount or dose of medicine to take, how often to take it, and how much you can take in one day. Twice as much product does not equal twice the relief of symptoms, and can cause dangerous side effects! For example: taking more than the maximum daily dose of acetaminophen (brand name Tylenol) may cause liver damage.

### INACTIVE INGREDIENTS

Ingredients not intended to treat your symptoms (e.g., preservatives, flavorings). If you have allergies to certain substances, you should check for them here.

### OTHER INFORMATION

How to store or dispose of the medicine.

If the drug facts label does not fully answer your questions, call the Blue Ridge Poison Center: 1-800-222-1222. Brenda—or one of our other nurses—will be happy to help.
experts at the Blue Ridge Poison Center, “It is a dangerous practice that could cause injury, illness, even death.”

Until recently, poisoning prevention messages about these packets were targeted to parents of babies and toddlers. Small children may be tempted to handle and eat the products because they smell good and look like candy or teething toys. Last year, U.S. poison control centers received reports of more than 10,500 children younger than 5 who were exposed to the capsules. Some of these children were hospitalized with vomiting, breathing difficulties and loss of consciousness. Since 2012, eight fatalities have been reported from ingestion of the packets.

Though calls about single-load liquid laundry packet exposures to young children far outnumber calls about teens and adults exposed to the same product, teen and adult calls are way up. As of January 15, 2018, U.S. Poison Centers have already managed 39 teen single-load liquid laundry packet exposures. This is exactly how many exposures were managed for the entire year in 2016.

So why the concern? “The laundry detergent packets pose several potential problems,” says Dr. Christopher Holstege, medical director of the Blue Ridge Poison Center at the University of Virginia Health System. “These products contain concentrated detergents that can cause injury and pain on contact with sensitive tissues like the eyes, mouth, and throat. When ingested, these products have also been associated with repetitive vomiting, coma, respiratory failure and even death.” The poison center recommends that parents have a conversation with their teens about

the dangers of eating the laundry packets. If someone has been exposed to these products, please contact the Blue Ridge Poison Center right away: 1-800-222-1222. Call even if there are no obvious symptoms. Our medical experts will tell you exactly what to do. The center is open 24/7, every single day. Free and confidential.

News and Notes

SCAM ALERT: Criminals posing as "poison control" have been calling people and demanding money. The real poison center may contact recent callers to check up on their medical condition after an exposure, but we NEVER ask for social security numbers, credit card numbers, or bank account information. If someone asks for this information, hang up immediately. Our services are always free and confidential. More details are on our website: www.brpc.virginia.edu.

Happy 40th Birthday, Blue Ridge Poison Center! Since opening in 1978, our experts have helped hundreds of thousands of callers with their poisoning concerns. In the past 40 years we have been staffed by 3 different medical directors, 7 different managers, 5 different Health Educators, and over 50 specialists in poisoning information—the nurses trained to help our hotline callers. It has been our honor to serve our fellow Virginians. Here’s to another 40 years!

National Poisoning Prevention Week is March 18-24, 2018. In its honor, please consider ordering some materials to share with your friends, family, and colleagues. We have magnets, stickers, posters, and more. All supplies are free! Visit www.brpc.virginia.edu and choose “free materials” from our home page. Be sure to follow us on Twitter and ‘like’ us on Facebook. We will be providing a new poisoning prevention tip each day during the week.

This free, quarterly newsletter is courtesy of the Blue Ridge Poison Center, serving Southwestern and Central Virginia and the Shenandoah Valley. We encourage you to print, post, forward, or share in any way, as long as The Blue Ridge Poison Center is credited. Archived issues can be found on our website: www.brpc.virginia.edu. If you have suggestions or comments, or want to sign up to receive new issues automatically, contact Kristin Wenger, Health Educator, Blue Ridge Poison Center, University of Virginia Health System: 434-982-4386 or klw2s@virginia.edu.

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