

THE ANTIDOTE

News and Notes from the Blue Ridge Poison Center

When Relief Becomes Risk:

How misusing cold medications could harm your health

- A mom panicked after realizing she had mistakenly been giving her twelve-year-old son 4 tablets of fever reducer every 2 hours—instead of 2 tablets every 4 hours—as the label directed.
- As a man returned the bottle of aspirin to the medicine cabinet, the label caught his eye. It said “may cause severe stomach bleeding if taken with blood thinners.” He takes a prescription blood thinner daily, and had been taking aspirin for several days to help with cold symptoms.
- A teen accidentally drank Vicks™ VapoSteam, a product added to room humidifiers, instead of Vicks™ cold medicine, because he removed it from the medicine cabinet in the dark and the bottles were very similar.



Mistakes with over-the-counter (OTC) medicines—products you can buy without a prescription—are a leading cause of

poisoning. During the winter, calls about OTC cough and cold medications are particularly high. When taken as directed, these products are safe and effective. But mistakes can lead to harm. In 2024, *more than 52,000 people* called a U.S. poison center because of problems with OTC cough and cold medications.

Experts at the Blue Ridge Poison Center say these simple steps will help avoid mistakes:

Check the Drug Facts Label.

By law, every OTC product must display a drug facts label. This

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POISON TRIVIA



Prenatal vitamins contain many essential nutrients crucial for developing babies and pregnant mothers. However, one of those nutrients could be life-threatening for a small child if they swallowed too much of it. What is it?

Answer on page 3

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 medicine you should take. Store your medicine in the original packaging so that you have this safety information on hand.

Don't overdo the same active ingredient

If you are taking more than one product, you could be getting an overdose of some of the active ingredients. Be especially careful with acetaminophen. Taking more than is recommended can harm your liver.

Avoid dangerous combinations. Some OTC products are not safe to take with blood thinners, antidepressants, opioids, or other prescription drugs. Some are not safe to take with alcohol. Check the Drug Facts Label to be sure.

Beware of the drowsy effect

Many "nighttime" cold formulas contain the active ingredient diphenhydramine. On its own, it can make you very sleepy. Taking too much of it, or in combination with other drugs or alcohol can have dangerous sedating effects.

Don't take medicine in the dark. Turn on the lights, and put on your glasses if you need them to read labels. Many products look similar.

Use the measuring cup or spoon provided with liquid medications. Do not use kitchen spoons.

Keep children safe. Store all medications up high, out of their sight and reach. Do not give OTC cold products to children under age 4 unless under the guidance of your pediatrician.

How to Read a Drug Facts Label Like a Pro

Active ingredients: the ingredients that make the medicine work.

Warnings: safety information such as side effects, questions to ask your doctor, and what to avoid.

Inactive ingredients: Other ingredients which don't treat your symptoms, such as flavorings, preservatives, etc. Check here if you have allergies!

Drug Facts	
Active ingredients	Purpose
Ingredient A 100 mg	cough suppressant
Ingredient B 150 mg	nasal decongestant
Uses Temporarily relieves:	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ 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.	
When using this product	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ you may get drowsy ■ be careful when driving a motor vehicle or operating machinery ■ excitability may occur, especially in children 	
Stop use and seek medical help right away if allergic reaction occurs.	
Keep out of reach of children. In case of overdose, get medical help or contact a Poison Control Center right away (1-800-222-1222).	
Directions	
Tablet melts in mouth. Can be taken with or without water.	
Age	Dose
adults and children 12 years and older	2 tablets every 12 hours; do not use more than 4 tablets in a 24-hour period
children 6 years to under 12 years	1 tablet every 12 hours; do not use more than 2 tablets in a 24-hour period
children under 6 years of age	ask a doctor
Other information	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ store at 20°–25°C (68°–77°F) ■ keep dry 	
Inactive ingredients	
anhydrous citric acid, aspartame, magnesium stearate, maltodextrin, modified food starch, sodium bicarbonate, D&C yellow no. 10	
Questions or comments?	
Call weekdays from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. EST at 1-800-555-5555.	

Uses: Describes the symptoms that the medicine treats.

Directions: the correct dose, how often to take it, and how much you can take in one day.

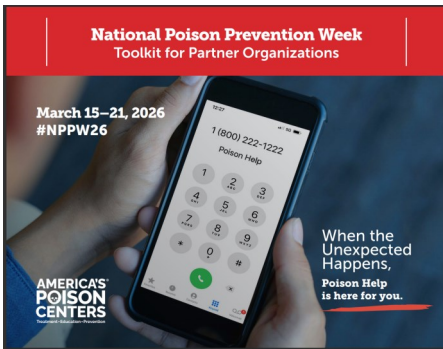
Other information: Storage information and anything else you need to know.

Image is from the [OTC Medicine Safety Program](#), developed for schools and families. Materials online. Free!

POISON TRIVIA ANSWER: Iron. Iron helps your body produce hemoglobin, a protein in your red blood cells which carries oxygen from your lungs to the rest of your body. But iron overdose can be deadly. Store all supplements out of the sight and reach of children. Follow safe dose instructions.

National Poison Prevention Week is the 3rd Week of March

You Can Help! Check Out the Partners Toolkit

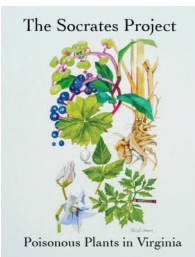


In 1961, Congress created National Poison Prevention Week to increase knowledge about how to prevent poisoning accidents. The goal of National Poison Prevention Week is to teach about the risks of poisonings at any age and increase everyone’s involvement in poison prevention. This year National Poison Prevention Week (NPPW) is March 15-21, 2026. The theme is *When the unexpected happens, Poison Help is here for you.*

You can help! We’ve created a [Partner’s Toolkit](#) of images and messages to share on your social media platforms.

Honoring the life of Alfred Goossens

Please join the Blue Ridge Poison Center at UVA Health in honoring the life of Mr. Alfred E. Goossens who died on January 22, 2026. After retiring as a world renowned flavorist, Alfred and his wife moved to central Virginia, where he became a Certified Virginia Master Naturalist in the Old Rag and Rivanna Chapter. Alfred lead a team of individuals from the Master Naturalists and partnered with the UVA Health’s Blue Ridge Poison Center to create a [The Socrates Project](#), [The Cleopatra Project](#) and [The Claudius Project](#), educating the public about poisonous plants, venomous/poisonous animals, and poisonous mushrooms native to Virginia, respectively.



Alfred was delightful, energetic, and passionate about our natural world. We are grateful to have known him and benefitted from his wisdom. [Read the obituary](#) for Alfred Goossens.



L to R: William “Bill” Birkhofer, certified Virginia Master Naturalist; Dr. Christopher Holstege, Director, Blue Ridge Poison Center; Alfred E. Goossens. 2019.

The [Blue Ridge Poison Center](#) is part of University of Virginia Health. Other funding sources include the [Virginia Department of Health](#) and [HRSA](#). We are accredited by [America’s Poison Centers](#). Proudly serving the Commonwealth since 1978. [Join the mailing list](#) to receive this quarterly newsletter.

