

Poison Prevention Press

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Acetaminophen Safety Tips

Follow these tips to make sure you use medicines that contain acetaminophen safely:

- The dose of acetaminophen for children is best based on weight, not age. Ask your doctor for the correct dose of acetaminophen for your child at each visit. The dose will change as the child grows.
- Read the label carefully to know how much acetaminophen is in the medicine you are taking.
- Avoid taking more than one medicine at a time that contains acetaminophen.
- Follow directions on prescription and over-the-counter medicines exactly. Never take more pills than directed and never take the pills more often than directed.

Did you know that...

- Acetaminophen overdose is the most common cause of liver failure in adults. About one-half of these overdoses are unintentional.
- There is an antidote that can prevent liver damage if given soon after an acetaminophen overdose.

What's New with Acetaminophen?

It seems that acetaminophen is often in the news. Sometimes it is due to product recalls; sometimes it is due to safety concerns. It is important to realize that there are over 600 products on the market that contain acetaminophen. The medicine is safe as long as it is taken as directed. Problems arise when patients take more medicine than directed by the label or their doctor or when patients use more than one product with acetaminophen at the same time.

Within the last year, some changes have been made by manufacturers and the Food and Drug Administration (FDA). The public will start seeing these changes on store shelves and in prescriptions very soon. This is a good time to take a look at the changes and how they will impact the public.

In January 2011, the FDA announced that they are limiting the amount of acetaminophen in prescription combination products to 325mg in each tablet or capsule. This is less than what is currently in many of these medicines. This change will happen over the next 3 years and affects products like Percocet® (oxycodone/acetaminophen) and Vicodin® (hydrocodone/acetaminophen) among other products. This will decrease the chance that a patient will have liver injury if they take too much of the prescription medicine or take it with another product that has acetaminophen. It is important to read prescription and over-the-counter medicine labels carefully. Acetaminophen will sometimes appear on a prescription label as "apap" or "acet".

In May, the Consumer Healthcare Products Association announced that makers of children's liquid acetaminophen products will move to a single strength. Currently, there are 2 strengths: concentrated infant products dosed by the dropperful and children's products dosed by the teaspoonful. After the change occurs, all products will contain the same acetaminophen strength whether they are labeled as the infant product or the children's product. Products will be sold with dosing devices that will help parents give the proper amount of medicine. This change will happen as current supplies run out...as soon as fall 2011. For a period of time, there could be products with different acetaminophen strengths on store shelves. It is very important that parents read acetaminophen product labels closely to verify the strength they have and the dose they need to give.

The most recent change was announced by McNeil, the maker of Tylenol, one of the most popular acetaminophen-containing products. Currently the label of the extra-strength product states that a maximum of 8 pills per day can be taken. New labeling will state that a maximum of 6 pills per day can be taken. In addition, current labeling instructs patients to take 2 pills every 4-6 hours. New labeling will instruct patients to take 2 pills every 6 hours. Bottles with the new labeling will appear on store shelves as soon as fall 2011.

If you have questions about acetaminophen or if you think someone has made a dosing error with acetaminophen, the experts at the poison center are just a phone call away! Call 1-800-222-1222 for assistance.