Drug Warning

Over-the-counter meds aren't safer than prescription pills.

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Many people think nothing of popping nonprescription medications, such as aspirin, acetaminophen, ibuprofen and other pain relievers as well as cold and cough remedies they purchase at stores. But these drugs are powerful medicines that require users precisely follow directions for use to avoid fatalities or harmful side effects.

"People often think that prescription and OTC drugs are safer than illicit drugs," warns the National Institutes of Health. "But they can be as addictive and dangerous and put users at risk for other adverse health effects, including overdose—especially when taken along with other drugs or alcohol."

Indeed, commonly used over-the- counter medications lead the brigade of widely available drugs most often involved in an overdose.

Although nonprescription pain pills are considered safe, read the label on any bottle containing these drugs. You'll find that when taken in unsafe amounts, OTC pain meds can cause liver damage. In fact, docs stress that taking just three regular-strength (325 milligrams) acetaminophen pills five times each day puts you at risk of overdosing.

Other ways of overdosing on OTC meds include mixing different dosages of pain pills and taking various painkillers that contain the same active ingredient.

To be safe, heed this doctor's warning: All painkillers can damage your liver, so use them wisely and well.

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