Haven’t Got Time for the Pain? Choose the Right Pain Reliever

When looking for an over-the-counter (OTC) pain or fever reducer, you’ll find two categories: nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) and acetaminophen.

NSAIDs, such as aspirin, ibuprofen (like Advil®) and naproxen (like Aleve®), act against pain and fever. Doctors may recommend these medications to also fight inflammation — redness and swelling caused by conditions such as arthritis and muscle sprains. NSAIDs may also be effective against menstrual cramps.

Acetaminophen (like Tylenol®) is a good choice for mild pain, headaches, muscle aches and stiffness, and fever. But it doesn’t work against inflammation.

Take the Proper Dose
Don’t exceed the dosage listed on the package. Taking a higher dose than recommended won’t provide more relief, and it can be dangerous. All NSAIDs, including aspirin, can damage stomach lining, and cause bleeding and ulcers. Too much acetaminophen can lead to liver damage and even death.

The risk of side effects increases when taking these medications more often than recommended. Remember, too, your chance of overdosing goes up if you’re taking more than one drug with the same active ingredient. For example, cough and cold medications may contain multiple ingredients including acetaminophen or NSAIDs. Take the time to carefully read the label of any over-the-counter medicine and you may need to adjust the dosage if you are taking multiple medicines.

For babies 6 months of age or younger, parents should only give acetaminophen for pain relief. For a child 6 months of age or older, either acetaminophen or ibuprofen can be given for pain relief. Be sure to ask your child’s health care provider for the right dosage for your child’s age and size. Do not give aspirin to your child because of Reye’s syndrome, a rare but very serious illness that harms the liver and brain.

If you are pregnant or have high blood pressure, heart disease, liver or kidney disease, or ulcers, check with your doctor before taking any nonprescription pain reliever. Very young children, the elderly, and people taking more than one type of medicine are at greater risk of adverse effects from over-the-counter medicines. Most healthy adults can occasionally use nonprescription pain relievers without worry. But talk to your doctor if you take pain relievers more than 10 days in a row, use them often, or if they aren’t effective against your pain.

Sources: Familydoctor.org, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention