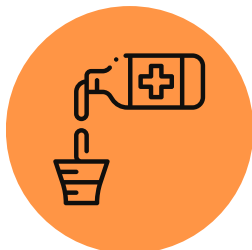
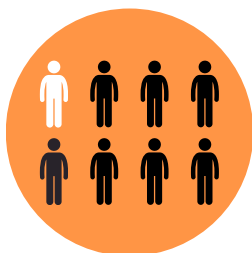


Substances At A Glance: OTC Medications



What are OTC medications? Over-The-Counter (OTC) medications are intended to treat a wide range of symptoms related to minor illnesses. Examples include cold medications, sleeping aids, and anti-allergy medications. These products are easily available and can be purchased without a prescription at supermarkets, drugstores, and convenience stores.



Non-medical OTC use among youth: In Canada, 1 in 8 students in grades 7-12 report using OTC medications to get high, including anti-nausea medicines with dimenhydrinate, cough syrups with dextromethorphan (DXM), sleeping medicine, or stimulants.¹ Meanwhile, one third of post-secondary age students who use pharmaceuticals or OTC medications in the past 12 months report high-risk use.²



Why do young people use OTCs? OTC medications can serve a variety of purposes such as relieving headaches, sinus pressure, and cold/flu symptoms. Other OTCs include laxatives, sleep aids, diet pills, and diuretics. Some youth choose to use medications with DXM in order to feel high, or others may use laxatives or diuretics and diet pills to achieve an ideal weight without medical support. Since these products are legal, available without a prescription, and easy for young people to access, they may be seen as safer than alcohol or other drugs.



Short-term effects: The effects of OTCs vary based on the amount and type of product used. Beyond their medical purposes, OTCs can sometimes cause impaired judgment, nausea, loss of coordination, headache, vomiting, loss of consciousness, numbness of fingers and toes, abdominal pain, irregular heartbeat, aches, seizures, panic attacks, psychosis, euphoria, cold flashes, dizziness, and diarrhea.



OTCs and Alcohol: Mixing alcohol with certain medications can cause nausea and vomiting, headaches, drowsiness, fainting, and loss of coordination. It can put users at risk for internal bleeding, heart problems, liver damage, and difficulties in breathing. Alcohol also can decrease the effectiveness of many medications or make them totally ineffective. OTCs may also include herbal remedies and other ingredients one may never have suspected of reacting negatively with alcohol.



Substances At A Glance: OTC Medications



What are the potential risks of OTC medication use? OTC medications containing codeine can cause risks associated with opioid use, including addiction, slowed breathing, weakness/heaviness of the limbs, confusion, and loss of consciousness.³ Possible side effects of dextromethorphan use depends on how much a person takes. Taking large doses can cause mania, delirium, hallucinations, and psychotic episodes.⁴



Can a person overdose on OTC medications? Overdose is possible. The point at which a young person may overdose on OTC medications varies depending on the amount of the drugs they took, over what time period, and if other drugs were involved. Some OTCs are less potent and cause minor distress, while others are very strong and can cause more serious problems. If your teen is unresponsive, and you suspect an accidental overdose of OTC drugs, call emergency services immediately.



How can someone reduce the potential risks of OTC medication use? OTC medications should be used as directed on the packaging for medical reasons only. Non-prescription cold and cough medications containing certain active ingredients (including dextromethorphan) are not to be used by children under age six.⁵ If the product causes drowsiness or fatigue, avoid driving or ask someone you trust to drive for you if you need to travel.



How can I help my kids understand the risks of OTC medications? Parents play a crucial role in discussing safe use of these medicines with their kids. It's important to establish clear goals together, remain positive, keep an open mind. In conversations, stay calm and be conscious about your own body language. Make sure to communicate any concerns you may have while also giving time to your kids to speak; listen to them carefully and keep the conversation going with open-ended questions.



Together for Safer Homes: A national initiative from Substance Canada which encourages families to make medication safety part of their regular home safety routine. The Together for Safer Homes campaign reminds parents to store their prescription and OTC medications securely, out of sight and out of reach, and return any medicines that are unused or expired to their local pharmacy for safe disposal.

Reference List

1. Government of Canada, 2025. [Canadian Student Alcohol And Drugs Survey, 2023-2024](#).
2. Government of Canada, 2024. [Canadian Post-Secondary Education Alcohol & Drug Use Survey 2021-2022](#).
3. Drug Free Kids Canada, 2021. [Dextromethorphan, Let's Talk About It!](#)
4. Government of Canada, 2023. [Codeine](#).
5. Government of Canada, 2022. [Concerns About Children's Medication](#).