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OTC Drugs May Cause Over-the-Top Risks

Most would agree that over-the-counter drugs (OTC) are a benign way to relieve annoying symptoms and discomfort associated with common illnesses. Yet employees should be mindful that OTC drugs - when taken inappropriately, combined with other drugs or used when chronic illnesses are present - can cause more harm than good. All drugs have benefits and risks, and the degree of acceptable risk is a judgment call. Encouraging employees to be aware of these risks is an important tactic to consider in your overall health/safety strategy.

OTC Risks

Some people experience adverse effects even when using the drugs appropriately. For example, some people have extreme

sensitivity to aspirin or anti-inflammatory drugs (i.e., naproxen, ibuprofen, etc.) that can lead to hives or breathing problems.

Other classes of drugs such as antihistamines (Chlor-Trimeton, Benadryl) may cause drowsiness and a sluggish feeling.¹

Chronic Disease and OTC

Chronic disorders can become worse if an OTC drug is taken inappropriately. Because OTC drugs are intended primarily for occasional use by those who are essentially healthy, people who have a chronic or serious disorder or who plan to take an OTC drug every day should consult a healthcare practitioner before they purchase them.

People with diabetes should consult their physician before they take antihistamines and decongestants because these drugs can worsen the disease. These drugs can also worsen the symptoms of an enlarged

prostate. People with hyperthyroidism or high blood pressure should also consult their physicians

before taking decongestants, as these drugs may cause serious side effects.²

Drug Overlap and Interactions

Healthcare practitioners may not think of asking about use of OTC drugs when they are prescribing medicine. Yet many OTC drugs can interact adversely with a wide range of drugs. These interactions can be serious, interfering with the effectiveness of a drug or causing side effects. For instance, some cold remedies that contain pseudoephedrine, such as Sudafed, caution against using the product with a monoamine oxidase inhibitor (MAOI - given for depression) or during the two weeks after discontinuing the MAOI.

Education efforts by employers can raise awareness on the risks of OTC drugs, proving that an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.

References:

- U.S. Food and Drug Administration. Drug interactions: what you need to know. <http://www.fda.gov/cder/consumerinfo/druginteractions.htm>.
- Merck. Precautions with over-the-counter drugs. <http://www.merck.com/mmhe/sec02/ch018/ch018b.html>.



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