



...Developing top-notch CNAs, one inservice at a time



A Client Care Module for Nurse Aides:

Over-the-Counter Medications



Developing Top-Notch CNAs, One Inservice at a Time



A Client Care Module:
**OVER-THE-COUNTER
MEDICATIONS**

We hope you enjoy this inservice, prepared by registered nurses especially for nursing assistants like you!

Instructions for the Learner

If you are studying the inservice on your own, please do the following:

- Read through **all** the material. You may find it useful to have a highlighting marker nearby as you read. Highlight any information that is new to you or that you feel is especially important.
- If you have questions about anything you read, please ask _____.
- Take the quiz. Think about each statement and pick the best answer.
- Check with your supervisor for the right answers. You need **8 correct** to pass!
- Print your name, write in the date, and then sign your name.
- Keep the inservice information for yourself and turn in the quiz page to _____ no later than _____. Show your Inservice Club Membership Card to _____ so that it can be initialed.
- Email In the Know at feedback@knowingmore.com with your comments and/or suggestions for improving this inservice.

THANK YOU!

After finishing this inservice, you will be able to:

List at least five types of commonly used over-the-counter medications.



Describe the main side effects of the above medications.



Discuss your role in monitoring medications and side effects.



Describe the signs of an allergic reaction to a medication.



Demonstrate your knowledge of commonly used OTC medications in your daily work.



Developing Top-Notch CNAs, One Inservice at a Time

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A Client Care Module: Over-the-Counter Medications

WHAT ARE OTC MEDICATIONS?

“OTC” stands for over-the-counter. A medication is considered “over-the-counter” when it can be purchased *without* a prescription from a physician. OTC medications are used to relieve uncomfortable symptoms like a fever or a runny nose.

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration (called the FDA, for short) regulates over-the-counter medications. When they approve an OTC drug for sale to the general public, they believe that:

- The medication’s benefits outweigh its risks.
- The potential for misuse and abuse of the product is low.
- Consumers can use it for self-diagnosed conditions.
- The product can be labeled so that non-medical professionals will understand its use.
- Health practitioners are not needed for the safe and effective use of the product.

However, it’s important to remember that even non-prescription drugs are powerful chemicals. While they are generally considered safe, they do



Successful use of over-the-counter medications requires good judgment, common sense, and careful reading of labels.

have the potential to be toxic and may produce harmful side effects in some people.

For example, children, senior citizens, and people with serious health problems are more likely to have side effects from OTC medications because their bodies metabolize the drugs differently.

The best defense—for yourself and for your clients—is to treat over-the-counter medications with respect and to learn as much as you can about them. So, keep reading for more information!

Basic OTC Medication Safety

- Always read each OTC product label. (See page 3.)
- Keep all OTC medications in their *original* containers and never mix different medications together in the same container.
- Pay attention to the expiration date on all over-the-counter medications. Notify your supervisor if you see that an expiration date has passed.
- Let your supervisor know if you notice a client taking a new OTC medication. Remember that ALL medications, whether they are prescription or over-the-counter, must be part of your client's plan of care.
- Make sure that all over-the-counter medications are stored according to the instructions on their label. Most do well in a cupboard, away from damp areas and sunlight. But, some medications need to be stored in the refrigerator. Your best bet is *always* to read the label.
- Know which activities, if any, your clients should avoid while taking a particular over-the-counter medication. For example, antihistamines often make people drowsy. It may be unsafe for an elderly person to walk without assistance when taking an antihistamine.
- If a client continues to have symptoms after starting a new over-the-counter medication, let your supervisor know. Your client may need additional medical attention.



Tips Against Tampering

Over-the-counter medications are packaged securely to make them tamper-proof. Here are some tips for making sure an OTC drug package has not been tampered with:

- Look carefully at the outer packaging of the product before buying it. When you first open the package, look over the inner packaging. Check for breaks, cracks, or holes in the outer and inner wrappings.
- If there is a tight plastic band around the top of the bottle, look to see if it is distorted or stretched (like it may have been rolled down and then put back into place).
- Check to see if the cap is on tight.
- Take a look inside the container. Does it appear too full or not full enough? If there is a cotton plug, is it sticky or stained?
- Read the expiration date and lot number on the outer wrapping or box. It should match exactly the expiration date and lot number on the medication container.
- Does the medication look normal in color and size? If not, check with the pharmacist. (It could be simply that the manufacturer changed the appearance of the drug, but it's best to be sure.)



Reading An OTC Medication Label

Patterned after the nutrition label found on foods, the labels on over-the-counter medications use simple language and are easy to read. Each label must include:

- The active ingredients contained in the medication. (An “active ingredient” is the chemical compound that makes the medicine work.) The active ingredients are ALWAYS listed first on the label.
- The purpose—or product category—of the medication. For example, the drug may be an *antihistamine*, an *antacid*, or a *cough suppressant*.
- The symptoms or conditions that the medication is meant to be used to treat or prevent. (The U.S. Food and Drug Administration—the FDA for short—must approve these uses.)
- Safety information such as:
 - When to talk to a doctor or pharmacist.
 - Under what conditions the drug may be ineffective—or even unsafe.
 - When to stop taking the drug.
- Instructions for how to take the medication, including:
 - How much medication may be taken safely—and for how long.
- Other information such as how to store the medication.
- Any inactive ingredients, such as colors or flavors, found in the drug. This information is helpful to people who are on special diets or who have specific allergies.



In addition, keep in mind that:

- Each medication container should also include a **toll-free telephone number** for people to call to get answers to questions about the drug.
- Over-the-counter medications have an **expiration date** after which the medicine should not be taken. This date is displayed on the container.
- Manufacturers sometimes make changes to their OTC products so it's important for people to **read the label each time** they buy the product.
- If people have questions after reading the label on an over-the-counter medication, they should **check with their physicians or pharmacists**.

Facts About Over-the-Counter Medications

- There are approximately 1,000 active ingredients used in the more than 300,000 OTC products available in the United States.
- Americans buy about 5 billion OTC medications every year, spending as much as \$40 billion on these products!
- More than 700 OTC medications available today use ingredients that were available only by prescription less than 30 years ago.
- Women use more over-the-counter medications than men do.
- Surveys show that three out of four Americans would rather treat themselves at home with over-the-counter medications than see a doctor for their problem.
- People over age 65 use more OTC medicines than any other age group, probably because they tend to have more long-term chronic illnesses than younger people. The average senior citizen takes two different OTC medications every day.



Basic Medication Tips For Nursing Assistants

- Follow your care plan for each client. If you are asked to assist clients with their medications, make sure you understand what that means. A few examples of assisting with medications may include:
 - Bringing medication containers to a client.
 - Loosening and removing a medication cap.
 - Watching as the client pours out the medication.
 - Steadying the client's hand while he or she pours out a medication.
- Let your supervisor know if a client's medication looks discolored or smells bad.
- Always listen to your clients. Be sure to report anytime a client seems confused about his or her medications.
- Let your supervisor know if clients are asking for medication. They may have orders for PRN medications (medicines that are given "as necessary").
- Pain medications are often given PRN, so be sure to report when a client complains of pain.
- Never give a client *any* medication unless you have been instructed by your supervisor--and you know you are allowed to do so in your state.

NOTE: In most states, actually counting out or measuring medications is part of a nurse's job.



Over-the-Counter Medications & Children

- When used as directed, OTC medications do not usually cause problems for children. However, it's important to remember that children process drugs differently than adults. For this reason, some over-the-counter drugs come in special forms that are made just for children.
- Never give aspirin to children under the age of 18 if they may have the flu (influenza) or chicken pox because they run a higher risk of developing *Reye's syndrome* (a drug reaction that can lead to brain injury).
- Keep in mind that children who are allergic to aspirin are also likely to have problems using ibuprofen.
- Watch carefully if you see parents giving liquid medicine to their child. A kitchen teaspoon may not hold the right amount of medicine—and should not be used. Instead, medication should be given using the measuring device—such as a dropper or a cup—that comes with the OTC medicine. Report any problems to your supervisor.



Over-the-Counter Medications & Seniors

- As you've learned, older adults often use many drugs at the same time, including prescription *and* OTC drugs. Senior citizens also process drugs differently than younger adults. This is why older adults need to be observed carefully for drug-drug interactions—problems that can happen when two or more drugs are taken at the same time. (See page 10.)
- Keep in mind that the decongestant *pseudoephedrine* (such as Sudafed) can increase blood pressure in the eyes. This can lead to glaucoma. Pseudoephedrine also reacts badly with many other drugs, such as blood pressure medications, antidepressants, insulin, and some products that treat low blood sugar.
- Seniors tend to have more chronic health problems than younger adults which puts them at higher risk for having problems when taking OTC drugs. Your clients are at risk if they have:
 - Breathing problems, such as asthma, emphysema, or bronchitis.
 - Bleeding disorders.
 - Diabetes.
 - Enlarged prostate gland.
 - Epilepsy.
 - Gout.
 - Heart disease.
 - High blood pressure.
 - Immune system problems.
 - Kidney disease.
 - Liver problems.
 - Parkinson's disease.
 - Psychiatric problems.
 - Stroke.
 - Thyroid problems.



Relieving Pain, Fever & Headaches

Which over-the-counter medications help treat pain, fever, and headaches?

There are two main types: acetaminophen (such as Tylenol) and nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (called NSAID's for short). NSAID's include medicines such as aspirin, naproxen, and ibuprofen.

How do these medications work?

Both acetaminophen and aspirin work by blocking inflammation and painful sensations in the brain and spinal cord, while other NSAID's reduce discomfort by creating chemical changes directly in the skin, muscles, and joints.

What are the main side effects of over-the-counter pain relievers?

The main side effects include:

- Abdominal pain
- Nausea
- Loss of appetite
- Ringing in the ears
- Dizziness
- Rash
- Liver toxicity



People buy more over-the-counter pain relief medications than any other OTC medicine.

Helping Clients Who Take OTC Pain Relievers

- Remember that *acute* pain, caused by such things as a muscle strain or a headache, often responds well to over-the-counter pain medications. Chronic pain from a long-term illness, such as arthritis or cancer, may not.
- Do you have clients with high blood pressure? Taking aspirin or other NSAIDs may increase their blood pressure so you may be asked to monitor their pressure more frequently.
- If your client takes OTC pain medication, remember that it is best taken with some light food, milk, or a full glass of water. This helps reduce the risk of an upset stomach.
- Notify your supervisor immediately if you observe your client having



blood in vomit or bloody, black, or tar-colored stools. These symptoms could indicate damage to the stomach or intestines, which could be dangerous.

- If your client takes ibuprofen, encourage the use of alcohol in moderation only. People who drink more than three alcoholic beverages a day have a higher risk of dangerous stomach bleeding when taking this drug.
 - Remember that ibuprofen may increase the sensitivity of the skin to sunlight. Encourage your clients to use a sunscreen and wear protective clothing when exposure to the sun is unavoidable.
 - Some aspirin tablets have a special coating to protect the stomach. They should be swallowed whole, not broken, chewed, or crushed.

Treating Coughs, Colds & Allergies

Which over-the-counter medications help treat coughs, colds, and allergies?

People use a number of OTC medications to treat symptoms such as runny nose, watery eyes, scratchy throat, and cough. These drugs include:

- Antihistamines (such as Benedryl)
- Decongestants (such as Sudafed)
- Nasal sprays (such as Afrin)
- Cough suppressants (such as Robitussin DM)
- Expectorants (such as Mucinex)

How do OTC cold medications work?

It depends on the ingredients. Some cold medications contain a *single* active ingredient while others treat a variety of symptoms by combining up to *four* ingredients.

Decongestants (including nasal sprays) shrink the blood vessels in the nose, reducing nasal congestion and allowing for easier breathing.

Antihistamines form a protective shell around histamine cells to keep them from causing allergy symptoms in the body.

Cough medicines containing *dextromethorphan* block the cough reflex, while those containing *guaifenesin* make it easier to clear a cough by thinning out the mucus.

What are the main side effects of over-the-counter cold medications?

- Dizziness
- Drowsiness
- Poor coordination
- Upset stomach
- Loss of appetite
- Blurred vision
- Palpitations
- Difficulty with urination
- Insomnia



Helping Clients Who Take OTC Cold Medications

- Antihistamines can cause a dry mouth. Encourage clients who are taking cold or allergy medications to drink plenty of fluids.
- Remember that nasal decongestants can aggravate high blood pressure. Report any changes in a client's blood pressure immediately.
- Antihistamines can make people drowsy—and unsteady on their feet. Make sure you monitor your client's safety if he or she appears drowsy.
- Report a client's use of OTC nasal spray, *especially* if used for more than three days.

Remember that old TV commercial about Nyquil that said it's "the nighttime, sniffing, sneezing, coughing, aching, stuffy head, fever so you can rest medicine"? That's because Nyquil contains FOUR active ingredients: an antihistamine, a decongestant, a cough suppressant and a pain reliever. This makes it a potent medicine which should be used with great care. Make sure your supervisor knows if a client is using this type of OTC "combo" drug.

Relieving Constipation

Which over-the-counter medications help treat constipation?

Believe it or not, there are *hundreds* of OTC laxative medications! The main types of laxatives include:

- Bulk-formers, like Metamucil
- Stool softeners, like Colace
- Lubricant laxatives, like mineral oil
- Stimulant laxatives, like Dulcolax
- Saline laxatives, like Milk of Magnesia

How do over-the-counter laxatives work?

Bulk-forming laxatives tend to swell up in the intestines while lubricating and softening the stool. *Stool softeners* prevent hardening of the feces by adding moisture to the stool. *Mineral oil* coats and softens stool making it good for people who need to avoid straining (for example, after surgery, heart attacks, and childbirth). *Stimulant laxatives* induce bowel movements by increasing the contraction of muscles in the intestines. *Saline laxatives* contain minerals that draw water into the intestines. This additional water

softens the stool and increases intestinal contractions.

What are the main side effects of over-the-counter laxative medications?

- Abdominal bloating
- Gas pains
- Abdominal cramping
- Flatulence
- Rectal itching
- Mineral oil toxicity
- Dependence (if used too frequently)



Remember that even if a client has only one or two bowel movements a week, she is probably not constipated if she is passing soft stools without excessive straining.

Helping Clients Who Take OTC Laxatives

- Laxatives, especially those that are bulk-forming, should be taken with *at least* eight ounces of fluid to be safe and effective. So, encourage your clients to drink up! However, keep in mind that laxatives containing *bisacodyl* (Dulcolax, for example) can cause severe cramping if taken with milk. Encourage clients to drink a full glass of water instead.
- Stool softeners should not be combined with mineral oil because they may increase the absorption and toxicity of the mineral oil, causing inflammation in the lymph glands, liver, and spleen.
- Mineral oil can cause pneumonia if it leaks into the lungs. To avoid aspiration, don't allow your clients to drink it while lying down.
- Remember that the bowel responds differently to each type of laxative. Some (like mineral oil) may produce results in less than an hour while others (like bulk-forming laxatives) can take up to a day to work.
- Help your clients prevent constipation by encouraging a high fiber diet (if tolerated), plenty of fluids, and some form of regular exercise.

Calming an Upset Stomach

Which over-the-counter medications help treat an upset stomach?

There are many different medications for “upset stomachs” including:

- Anti-gas medications, like Mylanta Gas
- Antacid drugs, like Maalox or Tums
- Heartburn or ulcer medications, like Zantac, Tagamet, or Pepcid
- Anti-nausea medicines like Emetrol or Dramamine

How do over-the-counter medications work to calm an upset stomach?

Drugs that fight excess gas usually contain *simethicone*—an ingredient which helps break up gas bubbles in the digestive tract. Antacids work by neutralizing existing stomach acid. Medications that treat gastric reflux (heartburn) and “stomach” ulcers work by reducing the production of stomach acid.

Anti-nausea drugs provide relief either by coating the stomach lining and neutralizing stomach acid (as with Emetrol) or by blocking receptors in the brain that trigger vomiting (as with Dramamine).

What are the main side effects of over-the-counter “stomach” medications?

Depending on the medication, the side effects may include:

- Intestinal bleeding
- Constipation
- Diarrhea
- Yellowing of the skin or eyes
- Bleeding gums
- Dizziness
- Headache
- Drowsiness
- Fatigue
- Muscle pain

Helping Clients Who Take OTC GI Medications

- While not always as convenient as tablets or gum, *liquid* antacids tend to work faster and are generally more effective. If your client doesn't like the taste of his liquid antacid, keep in mind that refrigerating the product may improve its flavor.
- Let your supervisor know if a client is “popping” OTC antacids. Taking too much antacid can actually cause the stomach to secrete *more* acid.
- Do not take antacids within one hour of taking Zantac. Antacids may decrease the effectiveness of Zantac.
- To help fight nausea, encourage your clients to drink beverages that settle the stomach, such as ginger ale or chamomile tea. Avoid caffeinated colas, coffees, and teas (since caffeine increases stomach acid). Suggest that they eat small, frequent meals—with no spicy or fried foods—to allow the stomach to digest foods gradually.
 - Remember that chewable anti-gas tablets must be chewed *thoroughly* before swallowing in order to be effective. They are best taken after meals and at bedtime.
 - If you observe any changes in a client's digestive habits, report them to your supervisor promptly.



What Are Adverse Drug Reactions?

Adverse drug reactions are effects from medications (including over-the-counter drugs) that are not helpful and not desired. There are four main types of adverse drug reactions:

Allergic Reactions

Medications are not natural to the body, and sometimes the body thinks it has to "fight off" the medication. This can trigger an allergic reaction. Signs of an allergic reaction include skin rash, hives, anxiety, shortness of breath, and wheezing.

Adverse Side Effects

A medication may have a side effect that is so serious or so uncomfortable for the patient that the drug is not worth taking. For example, even a seemingly harmless drug like Tylenol can cause liver damage in some children. And, people who take NSAIDs for many years may suffer kidney damage. (That's why it is so important for a physician to monitor long term use of OTC medications.)



Drug/Drug Interactions

A drug/drug interaction is a change in the effect of one drug when the client takes a second drug at the same time. Sometimes, one drug will "cancel out" the other medication and make it quit working. Or, two drugs taken at the same time might change into something stronger or something poisonous. There are *hundreds* of drug/drug interactions, and doctors find out about more every day.

Drug/Food Interactions

A drug/food interaction happens when the food or beverage a person consumes affects a medicine so that it doesn't work the way it should. Sometimes, just having food in the stomach when the pill is swallowed will keep it from working. That is why some medications need to be taken on an empty stomach. There are also specific foods that can affect a drug. For example, orange juice should not be consumed with antacids which contain aluminum. The juice increases the body's absorption of the aluminum—which could ultimately be toxic.

Help Your Clients Avoid Adverse Drug Reactions By...

- Listening to your clients if they tell you about a drug allergy. Report what they say to your supervisor.
- Reporting changes in your client's condition that may be from uncomfortable side effects.
- Reminding your clients what it means to take a medication on an *empty* stomach (one hour before eating or two hours after eating).
- Encouraging your clients to swallow their medications with a full glass of water—*not* hot coffee or alcohol.
- Helping your clients follow the schedule for taking their med—as ordered by the doctor and/or the nurse.
- Not letting your clients take their pills in the dark. They may take the wrong pill or the wrong amount.



Questions & Answers About OTC Medications

Q: What is a generic drug?

A: A generic drug is an identical “copy” of a brand name medication. It must meet the same quality and safety standards as brand name drugs. For example, Motrin is a brand name over-the-counter medication. But, the generic version—ibuprofen—is widely available and is often less expensive. All generic drugs must be reviewed and approved by the Food & Drug Administration (the FDA).

Q: Can people actually overdose on over-the-counter medications?

A: Yes! In fact, it’s possible for people to overdose without even realizing they took too much. How? Because a number of different drugs have the *same* active ingredient. For example, if John takes a cold remedy—plus a Tylenol for his headache—he’s probably taking two drugs with the same active ingredient—and could be doubling or tripling the safe amount. Every year, more than 56,000 Americans visit the emergency room because they accidentally took too much acetaminophen. Nearly 500 of them die.

Q: Are OTC medications always cheaper than prescription drugs?

A: Not always. It’s possible that a simple over-the-counter medicine may be more expensive than a similar drug prescribed by a physician. If people have questions about the cost of a drug, they should talk to their physician or pharmacist.

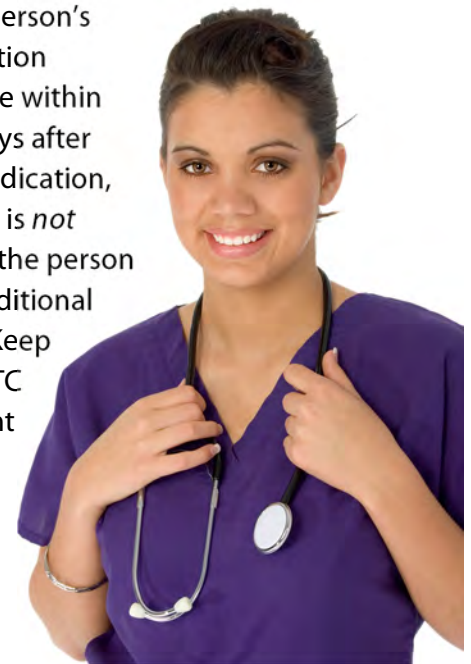
Q: Is it possible to become “addicted” to over-the-counter medications?

A: Yes, some OTC drugs can be habit-forming, particularly laxatives and nasal decongestant sprays. If taken for long periods, these drugs can

produce “rebound” symptoms, meaning that the original problem (why the person took the drug) gets worse and worse. For example, nasal decongestant sprays work by constricting swollen nasal tissues. However, if taken too often, the tissues will eventually stop reacting to the drug and the nasal congestion will worsen.

Q: How can someone tell if an over-the-counter medication is working?

A: Generally, if a person’s illness or condition doesn’t improve within three to five days after starting the medication, the medication is *not* working—and the person should seek additional medical care. Keep in mind that OTC drugs are meant to treat *minor* health problems only.



For additional helpful information about medications, ask your supervisor about the following In the Know inservices:

- The Basics of Medication Administration
- Understanding Commonly Prescribed Medications





Developing Top-Notch CNAs, One Inservice at a Time

A Client Care Module: Over-the-Counter Medications

**Are you "in the know" about over-the-counter medications?
Circle the best choice and then check your answers!**

1. TRUE or FALSE

People should not use OTC medications unless directed to do so by their physician.

2. TRUE or FALSE

An OTC medication's *active ingredient* gives the drug its flavor and color.

3. TRUE or FALSE

One of the best ways to use over-the-counter medications safely is to read the label on the container thoroughly before taking the product.

4. If you are ordered to assist a client with OTC medications, you may do all the following EXCEPT:

- A. Bring a medication container to the client.
- B. Loosen a medication cap for the client.
- C. Count out the right number of pills from the bottle.
- D. Steady the client's hand while he pours out the medication.

5. TRUE or FALSE

Chronic health problems such as diabetes, high blood pressure, and asthma put people at risk for having side effects from over-the-counter medications.

6. Which of the following OTC medications helps bring down a fever?

- A. Antihistamines.
- B. Acetaminophen.
- C. Decongestants.
- D. Laxatives.
- E. All of them.

7. Metamucil is an example of which kind of laxative?

- A. Stool softener.
- B. Stimulant.
- C. Saline.
- D. Bulk-forming.

8. TRUE or FALSE

If your clients take ibuprofen, you should protect them from exposure to the sun.

9. TRUE or FALSE

Many cold and allergy medicines contain a *combination* of active ingredients.

10. TRUE or FALSE

Generally, if someone's symptoms don't improve after taking an OTC medication for two weeks, the drug is not working.

EMPLOYEE NAME
(Please print):

DATE: _____

- ***I understand the information presented in this inservice.***
- ***I have completed this inservice and answered at least eight of the test questions correctly.***

EMPLOYEE SIGNATURE:

SUPERVISOR SIGNATURE:

Inservice Credit:

<input type="checkbox"/> Self Study	1 hour
<input type="checkbox"/> Group Study	1 hour

***File completed test
in employee's
personnel file.***