Safe Use of Acetaminophen (Tylenol)

What is Acetaminophen?
Acetaminophen is a generic name for products such as Tylenol. You may see the name acetaminophen abbreviated as “APAP.” Acetaminophen is used for pain and fever, but it does not reduce inflammation. Acetaminophen is less irritating to the stomach than some other over-the-counter pain medications such as aspirin or ibuprofen.

What Products Contain Acetaminophen?
Acetaminophen is found both as a single ingredient (Tylenol, etc) and in combination with other medications (Excedrin PM, Midol, etc and in Canada Benylin, All-in-One Cold and Flu, etc). Store shelves are filled with products that relieve pain (Excedrin Extra Strength, etc) and allergy, cold, and flu symptoms (Vicks NyQuil, Vicks DayQuil, etc). While there are countless products out there to choose from, many will have the same active ingredients, including acetaminophen. There are also many prescription medications that contain acetaminophen (Vicodin, Percocet, Fioricet, etc and in Canada Robaxacet-8, Percocet, etc).

What Happens When I Take Too Much Acetaminophen?
Too much acetaminophen can damage the liver and kidneys. Acetaminophen is usually cleared by the liver to nontoxic compounds. When someone takes too much acetaminophen, the liver becomes overloaded and extra acetaminophen has to be cleared by another pathway in the liver. This other pathway creates a compound that is toxic. Some symptoms of acetaminophen toxicity are loss of appetite, nausea, vomiting, abdominal pain, a general feeling of discomfort, confusion, yellowing of the skin and eyes, coma, and in severe cases, death. If you suspect an acetaminophen overdose and live in the U.S., contact the national poison control hotline at 800-222-1222 immediately to be connected to a poison control center in your area. If you live in Canada, call 911 immediately and they will put you in contact with your regional poison control centre. In Canada, you can also find the phone number for your regional poison control centre listed on the first page of your telephone book, or it can be obtained from the Canadian Association of Poison Centres’ website at http://www.capcc.ca/ or from your local pharmacy.

How Much Acetaminophen Is Too Much?
Usually, adults can take one to two 325 mg tablets, every four to six hours as needed. You should not take more than FOUR GRAMS (4000 mg) of acetaminophen in a 24-hour period. This is equal to about twelve of the 325 mg tablets, or eight of the extra-strength (500 mg) tablets.

If you have three or more alcoholic drinks a day, ask your healthcare professional whether you should take acetaminophen or other pain reliever/fever reducers. They will be able to tell you whether or not it’s a good idea to take acetaminophen, and how much you can safely take.

What About Children?
Children are at special risk of getting too much acetaminophen. The dose for children changes as they grow older. Check the labels on your child’s medications to see which ones contain acetaminophen. Check with your pharmacist or other healthcare professional before combining medications and ask what dose is appropriate for your child. You can also check to see if it’s practical for you to use one acetaminophen product for all the children in your family. If your children are very different in age, this may not be an option. In this case be very careful not to confuse which cup, spoon, or dropper goes with which product. Some products are more concentrated than others, which means you need a smaller amount for a dose. Lastly, never give young children adult-strength acetaminophen.

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