

Maryland Acetaminophen Coalition

A group of health care providers and advocates representing various facets of patient care in the state of Maryland working in cooperation with the Maryland Board of Pharmacy



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Acetaminophen: Imperative Considerations for Health Care Providers

It is imperative that all health care professionals be aware of the safety profile and potential benefits of the pain-reliever acetaminophen. Acetaminophen is sold under several brand names and is also available in over 600 cough and cold products, sleep aids, and prescription pain relievers. It is safe and effective when used in recommended dosages for patients according to their current health status.

The widespread utilization of acetaminophen by patients may increase the incidence and prevalence of misuse, which can lead to severe health care outcomes, including, for example, liver failure or death. Many acetaminophen overdoses are caused by patients inadvertently taking more than the recommended dose (i.e., 4 grams a day) of a particular OTC product, or by taking more than one product containing acetaminophen (e.g., an Over-the-Counter (OTC) product and a prescription drug containing acetaminophen).

What can I do as a Health Care Provider?

There are limited data available describing patient / consumer behavior with acetaminophen products or consumer understanding of acetaminophen toxicity. However, based on the prevalence of liver injury, it appears that there are distinct contributing factors:

- Taking any amount of acetaminophen over the recommended total daily dose may lead to liver injury (the patient's health status and daily activities determine their recommended total daily dose);
- A wide array of OTC and prescription acetaminophen products used in a range of doses for various indications;
- Labeling abbreviations make it difficult to identify acetaminophen as an ingredient in OTC and prescription products due to (i.e., acetaminophen labeled as APAP);
- Dosing confusion – multiple children's products contain different strengths and can cause confusion amongst adults for appropriate dosing;
- Limited awareness among the general public or patients regarding the association between acetaminophen overdose and liver toxicity/injury.

As health care providers, we can provide useful information regarding the safe use of acetaminophen, as well as other pain relievers, for our patients. **This includes educating patients about the following:**

1. It is important to know what active ingredients are in their medicines;
2. Acetaminophen is often used in both OTC and prescription medicines;
3. It can be dangerous to combine pain relievers, prescriptions, or multi-symptom medicines with the same active pain relief ingredient.
4. If present, acetaminophen is listed in the "Active Ingredients" section of the Drug Facts label of OTC medicine packaging.
5. If in doubt, ask your doctor or pharmacist before taking the medicine(s).

Below are a few websites that are useful for patient information and education about the safe use of acetaminophen products.

- **Over-the-Counter Pain Relievers/Fever Reducers: Using Acetaminophen and NSAID Medicine Safely:** U.S. Food and Drug Administration
See: www.fda.gov/cder/drug/analgesics/default.htm
- **How to read the OTC Drug Facts Label**
National Council on Patient Information and Education (NCPIE)
See: www.bemedwise.org/label/label.htm