

Rx Basics:

Medicine Cabinet Essentials



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Does your medicine cabinet seem like a black hole cluttered with prescription and over-the-counter (OTC) medications? How frequently do you think your medicine cabinet should get a check-up? Where should medications be stored? What kinds of medicines and first aid products should you have on hand to treat minor ailments and injuries? How should you get rid of outdated medications? These are important questions to answer to prevent taking outdated medications and avoid potential complications.

Medicine Cabinet Check-ups

It is recommended that you give your medicine a check-up every 6 months or at least once a year. The first step is to take a look at all the medicines (prescription and OTC) and supplies that you have. Check the expiration date on every medication. You don't want to take chances with a medicine that no longer works the way it's supposed to or has become a breeding ground for bacteria or fungus. Look for medicines that are discolored, dried out, crumbling, or show other signs that they are past their prime. Discard outdated medications and supplies (including sunscreens) and medications you are no longer taking. Restock supplies that are low or are missing as needed.

Safe Storage for Your Medications

Contrary to popular belief, medications should not be stored in the bathroom medicine cabinet. Showers and baths create heat and humidity that can cause some drugs to deteriorate. It is best to keep your medications in an area that is convenient, cool, and dry. Other first aid products (such as bandages, tweezers, gauze, cotton balls, etc) may be stored in your bathroom medicine cabinet because they are not affected by heat and humidity. Keep all items in their original containers so that no one takes the wrong medicine. Accidental overdoses can occur in children of all ages. Medications should be kept out of the reach of young children, locked up in a drawer or cabinet or on a shelf that they cannot reach. It is important that parents talk with their teenagers about the negative effects (accidental overdose, death) of using OTC medications and other household products.

"Must Haves" for Self-Treatment and First Aid

Table 1 provides a list of medications and first aid products that a home should have. The table includes information on uses, storage, and other important information. For homes with children, special considerations are necessary. When selecting OTC products for children, it is important to choose medications that are appropriate for each child's age. This may mean stocking regular, children's, and infant's strengths of a product. Because each formula has a different amount of medication per dose, it is important to use the dropper or cup that came with that medication. It is also important to know each child's age and weight to prevent under- or overdosing. Table 2 shows the differences between adult, children's, and infant's liquid acetaminophen formulas.