A Healthy Medicine Chest

By Dr. Ramona Warren

Every family has a cabinet where they keep bandages, ointments and over-the-counter (OTC) medications to treat a variety of conditions from colds and digestive problems to run-of-the-mill aches and pains. It is estimated that four out of five American adults commonly use OTC medications. While these medications are less expensive than visiting a doctor or purchasing prescription medication, they aren’t harmless. OTC medications can have serious adverse effects, especially for the very young and those over the age of 65.

Acetaminophen, the active ingredient in Tylenol, is the most common OTC medication taken for pain relief and fever. The overuse of acetaminophen results in over 100,000 calls to poison control centers, 50,000 emergency room visits, 30,000 hospitalizations and 450 deaths each year due to acute liver failure. In 2012, *The Journal of General Internal Medicine* published a study revealing nearly 25 percent of people unintentionally take more than the prescribed daily limit of 4,000 milligrams of acetaminophen and 46 percent took two acetaminophen-containing products simultaneously, leading to an overdose of the medicine.

Other commonly used OTC medications include non-steroidal anti-inflammatories (NSAIDS) such as Motrin, Advil and Aleve, which are often taken to treat pain associated with arthritis, headaches or athletic injuries. Although common, studies have shown that NSAIDS do pose an increased risk of heart attack and stroke. They may also increase blood pressure and lead to heart failure.

There are many natural alternatives available that don’t have the negative side effects and risks associated with OTC medications. Here are some suggestions for building your own healthy medicine chest:

**Cough and sore throat:**

Elderberry syrup can be used to reduce bronchial inflammation, boost the immune system, and decrease mucous production. It can also help soothe a cough and ease the discomfort of a sore throat.

Honey, which is anti-inflammatory and analgesic, can be beneficial for respiratory conditions. Mix honey with warm water. Add fresh-squeezed lemon, or use lemon and peppermint essential oils, for fast-acting benefits.

**Cuts and scrapes:**

Tea tree oil can be beneficial for cuts, scrapes, skin irritation and blemishes. Put a small amount directly on the effected area daily. Tea tree oil has natural anti-microbial and anti-fungal properties and speeds up the rate of healing.

Lavender, rosemary, and myrrh oils have anti-bacterial healing properties and can be mixed with raw honey to create a homemade healing paste that can be applied to cuts, scrapes and burns.

**Pain and Inflammation:**

Omega 3 fatty acids and Turmeric are commonly used to help reduce inflammation. Ginger essential oil can be used to decrease inflammation and has been found in studies to be a good substitute for NSAIDs.

Feverfew can be effective for treating headaches, migraines, rheumatoid arthritis, stomachaches and toothaches. Capsaicin, found in hot pepper like cayenne, can be used as a topical cream to reduce pain and inflammation. Devil’s Claw is an herb that can provide relief for arthritis and low back pain.  Fish oil, Boswellia and Salagesic are additional supplements we use in our office to help with pain and inflammation.

**Bruises/muscle strains:**

Ice is a natural anti-inflammatory. For the relief of acute minor injuries, apply ice to the affected area for 10-20 minutes, then remove the ice for 10-20 minutes, to relieve pain and decrease swelling.

Arnica has been used since the 16th century. It can reduce pain and inflammation, making it a great first line of defense against any kind of bruise, ache, sprain, exercise-related injury or arthritis flare-up. Arnica can be applied to the skin in the form of an oil, cream and ointment. It can also be consumed in tablet form.

**Digestive distress:**

The digestive system houses 70 percent of the immune system. That means a healthy gut is not only vital for digestion, but necessary for staying healthy. Healthy gut flora can be decreased from the use of OTC drugs, antibiotics, emotional stress, sugar, genetically modified foods, and poor sources of drinking water. Probiotics help aide digestion by increasing the amount of good bacteria in the gut. Probiotics can be found in supplemental tablets or consumed by eating foods like sauerkraut and kimchi, or drinks like kombucha and coconut kefir.

Psyllium husk is a tiny gel-covered seed with dietary fiber that can help with constipation and diarrhea. When psyllium husk is combined with liquid, it swells and produces more bulk, which stimulates the intestines to contract and speeds the passage of stool through the digestive tract. It’s beneficial for diarrhea because it soaks up water in the digestive tract, which helps make the stool firmer and slower to pass through the system.

Chia seeds provide a significant amount of fiber to help relieve constipation, as well.

**Insomnia:**

Most OTC sleep aids contain antihistamines, which make you drowsy but can cause a dry mouth and dry eyes, as well as drowsiness, the next day. Melatonin, while a natural option, is a hormone and can be disruptive to natural hormone production. Therefore, it should not be the first choice for an alternative sleep aid.

Instead, reach for valerian root, an herb known for its calming effect. It can both improve the quality of sleep and decrease the amount of time it takes to get to sleep. Vetiver, an essential oil native to India, can be rubbed on the bottom of the feet to decrease anxiety and insomnia. Calming minerals such as calcium and magnesium are also very helpful for sleep, especially when taken in the evening. Gaba, an amino acid and neurotransmitter, can help calm the brain, reduce anxiety and improve sleep.

**Allergies:**

Allerplex and Antronex are supplements we carry in our office that are very helpful for allergies. Antronex acts as an antihistamine, without the side effects.

Alternatively, you can blend 2–3 drops of peppermint, eucalyptus and [lavender oil](http://draxe.com/lavender-oil-benefits/) with one teaspoon of coconut oil and massage the mixture into the temples, behind the ears, and into the bottoms of the feet to help relieve seasonal allergies.

There are numerous herbs, supplements and essential oils that can help treat a variety of ailments. Create a healthy medicine chest by keeping some of these on hand. If you are interested in attending a class on essential oils that we will be holding at Pathways to Healing, please email us at pathwaysth@gmail.com.