

When Over-the-Counter Medications Are Prescribed

Medications that can be bought without a prescription are often called *over-the-counter* (OTC) medications. Medications that require a prescription from a prescriber and are given to you by a pharmacist are called *prescription medications*. Sometimes, your health care provider may “prescribe” an OTC medication alone or along with prescription medications as part of a treatment plan for a common or more serious condition. If an OTC medication is prescribed for you, it is important to take the drug exactly as your health care provider has directed.

ISMP Canada received a report about a consumer who was given prescriptions for an OTC medication along with 3 prescription medications to treat an infection. However, the OTC medication was not added to their pharmacy profile, and it was not dispensed to them by the pharmacist. As a result, the consumer did not take the OTC medication as prescribed, the infection was not fully treated, and the treatment plan had to be restarted later on.

MedError shares the following tips to keep in mind if your health care provider has prescribed an OTC medication.

Treat OTC medications with the same care as prescription medications.

- Ask your pharmacist to include prescribed OTC medications on your pharmacy profile to help make sure they are not accidentally missed.
- Find out if the pharmacy will give the prescribed OTC medication to you or if you need to get it from the shelf yourself.
 - If you are getting it from the shelf, check back with the pharmacist to be sure you have the right medication in the correct strength and form.



Understand why an OTC medication has been prescribed for you and learn how to use it.

- Ask your prescriber to write the purpose for the OTC medication on your prescription.
- Ask whether the OTC medication should be taken regularly or only when needed, or if it is optional.
- Ask the pharmacist to give you a prescription label or write out your prescriber’s specific instructions for how to take the OTC medication and for how long. Follow the prescriber’s instructions carefully.

Mederror newsletters are reviewed by consumers who are committed to improving medication safety. Learning from consumer reports is shared with health care providers through [ISMP Canada](#) publications. This newsletter shares information about safety medication practices, is noncommercial, and is therefore exempt from Canadian anti-spam legislation. *Funding support provided by Health Canada. The views expressed herein do not necessarily represent the views of Health Canada. Mederror is a component of the [Canadian Medication Incident Reporting and Learning Prevention System \(CMIRPS\)](#).