



American College of Medical Toxicology

Physicians Specializing in the Care of Poisoned Patients

Aspirin

What is aspirin?

Aspirin is a pain relieving (analgesic), fever-treating (antipyretic), and anti-inflammatory medicine. It also has effects on the cells that cause blood to clot (anti-platelet) and is commonly used to help prevent heart attacks and strokes. It is closely related to the other non-steroidal anti-inflammatory (NSAID) medicines such as ibuprofen, naproxen, and meloxicam.

Do other medicines contain aspirin?

Several combination products that include aspirin are available. Typically these are headache medicines such as Fiorinal® and some formulations of Excedrin®.

Many other products contain chemicals that are closely related to aspirin and can cause similar toxic effects. Examples include many muscle or warming creams, “green” rubbing alcohol, and oil of wintergreen.

How much aspirin is too much?

You should always follow your doctor’s instructions or the package directions when determining the appropriate dose of a medicine, especially aspirin. Usual doses range anywhere from 81 mg per day to 650 mg four times per day, depending on what the aspirin is being given for. If you have questions you should discuss your aspirin dose with your primary care physician or pharmacist.

Is aspirin dangerous?

When taken in the recommended doses, aspirin is typically very safe, though it can irritate the stomach and lead to ulcers and bleeding. In large overdoses aspirin can cause issues ranging from ringing in the ears to very serious medical problems such as kidney injury and even death.

What happens when someone takes too much aspirin?

In normal doses, your body excretes aspirin into the urine fairly quickly. Large overdoses overwhelm this process, allowing the aspirin to build up in your blood, kidneys, and brain. Symptoms can include nausea/vomiting, ringing in the ears, and rapid/deep breathing.

At the hospital, treatments for taking too much aspirin include specific types of IV fluids and treatment with oral medications to help prevent the body from absorbing more aspirin. Severe or life threatening cases may be treated with dialysis.

Can I give aspirin to my child?

Aspirin is typically NOT recommended for children, especially children with potential viral illnesses such as chicken pox, flu, or the common cold. Aspirin may be recommended or prescribed by your pediatrician for certain very rare or unusual conditions. In these cases you should follow their directions on appropriate doses very carefully.

Can I take aspirin if I'm pregnant?

In general, medicines other than aspirin should be considered for treating pain or headaches during pregnancy. Aspirin is known to cross into the fetus' blood, and has been associated with certain complications in newborns when taken close to the time of delivery. Low doses of aspirin are occasionally used in a variety of different medical conditions in pregnancy. If you have specific questions about aspirin during pregnancy, you should discuss them with your primary obstetrician.

What should I do if someone takes too much aspirin?

Contact your local poison control center at 1-800-222-1222. They will help you determine if the person needs to be seen in a hospital or not based on factors such as how much they may have taken and whether they took it to try to hurt themselves. Other home based treatments, such as trying to make the person vomit, are generally not recommended and should not be tried unless directed to by a medical professional.

Created by Kevin Maskell, MD. These answers are provided by volunteer medical toxicologists for the purpose of public education, and do not necessarily represent the policies or positions of the American College of Medical Toxicology.

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