A Dangerous Mix
Learn why it’s not safe to take medications with other substances.

Anything you ingest can have an effect on your body. For instance, the caffeine in coffee can help you stay awake. And an allergy pill can relieve your stuffy sinuses.

The active ingredients in prescription and over-the-counter (OTC) drugs are tested for safety. But mixing medications may have dangerous side effects.

Interaction Alert

An active ingredient is the part of a drug that acts on your body. Combining substances can change the way an active ingredient works. This can increase its effect on your body, make it less effective, or have other unexpected results.

For example, Ritalin is a stimulant that is prescribed to treat attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). It increases alertness and attention. It can also increase heart rate and blood pressure. The decongestants in many OTC allergy medications are also stimulants. Taking Ritalin with a decongestant can further increase heart rate and blood pressure. Over time, this can damage the heart.

Even with OTC drugs, you can exceed the dosage of an active ingredient. Imagine that you have a cold. You may take Tylenol for a headache and cold medicine for a cough. But many OTC cold treatments contain acetaminophen, Tylenol’s active ingredient. Mixing these medications can mean too much acetaminophen. This increases your risk for liver damage.

Even vitamins, herbal supplements, and foods can interact with medications. For example, the allergy medicine Allegra is less effective if taken with citrus fruits. The herbal supplement St. John’s wort may...
interact with drugs that treat depression. These interactions can cause high fevers, seizures, or other dangerous side effects.

**Protecting Yourself**

All medications include labels with instructions and interaction warnings. Always carefully read labels with an adult. Talk to your doctor before starting a new medication.

Vitamins and herbal supplements might not be labeled with warnings. Ask your pharmacist or doctor about possible interactions before starting a medication.

Staying smart and reading labels carefully will make sure your medicine is helping. After all, medicine should make you feel better, not worse!