

The New Jersey Poison Information & Education System — Serving New Jersey
Since 1983

NEWS RELEASE

For Immediate
Release

Media to contact:

800-222-1222

800-962-1253 if outside NJ

Cold and Flu Season Worries State Poison Control Center

Overdose Risk Increases with Overuse of Medicines

Warning: Overused, misused and/or abused cold and flu medicines sold over-the-counter (OTC) carry the same overdose concerns as prescription medicines. All medicines have the potential to cause adverse effects regardless of where it is sold. New Jersey is now in a highly active cold and flu season; on track to be one of the worst seasons in years. Sufferers must be aware of the significant risk for overdose, which may cause serious, even fatal health consequences.

(Newark, NJ) – Cold and flu season hits New Jersey hard as healthcare facilities around the state see a surge in flu-related visits and hospital admissions. Although OTC products sold in retail/chain pharmacies, supermarkets, convenience stores, and online help ease symptoms, these products do not treat illnesses like the common cold or flu. Anyone experiencing cold/flu symptoms should see their healthcare provider right away. Starting treatment quickly helps lower the risk for severe sickness, as well as, helping to stop the spread of these viruses to others. Symptoms can include but are not limited to fever, congestion/runny nose, cough, sore throat, chills/sweats, headache, body aches, and tiredness. Getting a flu shot (flu vaccine) every year is the best way to protect you, loved ones and your community against flu illness.

“During a severe flu season, our poison control center prepares for an uptick in calls from both the public and healthcare providers as the opportunity for

unintentional injuries and drug overdoses significantly increase,” says Diane Calello, MD, Executive and Medical Director of the [New Jersey Poison Control Center](#) at [Rutgers New Jersey Medical School](#)’s Department of Emergency Medicine. “Taking two or more products with the same active ingredients at the same time is a common mistake, but it’s one that can cause a life-threatening overdose.”

“The increased amount of medicines in the home during cold and flu season raises health concerns for us at the poison center. Many of the substances commonly involved in poisoning exposures are those typically found around the home. Since symptom relief products carry such a high potential for overuse, misuse and/or abuse, lock them up to help prevent potential overdose or addiction,” says Calello.

Although many products can be bought without having to see a healthcare provider, it’s important to remember such products are in fact medicines, which means they carry risks. “If used in the wrong way, in the wrong amount, or by the wrong person, OTC products can cause serious even fatal adverse effects. Consumers often forget cough and cold remedies, vitamins, and supplements carry the same risks for overdose as prescription medicines,” says Calello.

Following the directions on a product’s label is the surest way to prevent adverse effects including overdose. In addition, the NJ Poison Control Center offers the following advice:

- **Choose medicines that only treat the symptoms you have.** Taking more medicines than needed may cause more harm than good. The more ingredients, the higher the risk of adverse effects. For example, use a decongestant if you are congested, but only use decongestants with cough suppressant if you have a cough as well. Do not use a product that reduces fever if you do not have a fever.
- **Some medicines can make driving unsafe.** “Drugged driving” refers to driving under the influence of prescription drugs, over-the-counter medicines, marijuana, or illegal drugs. Products such as cough and cold remedies, allergy (antihistamine) medicines, sleeping aids, and anti-anxiety medicines can cause side effects known to make driving difficult and unsafe.

- **Mixing alcohol with medicine is dangerous.** Many ingredients used in medicines can interact dangerously with alcohol causing side effects like nausea, vomiting, drowsiness, fainting, and/or loss of coordination. It can also put you at risk for internal bleeding and other serious effects. Dangerous interactions can still occur even if the medicine and alcohol were not ingested at the same time.
- **Take only one medicine at a time with the same active ingredient.** Many medicines contain the same active ingredients, even if they have different names and/or intended purposes. Taking these together, even if each is in the intended dose, can result in serious health consequences including liver damage.
- **More does not mean better or safe.** Do not take medicines longer or in higher doses (amounts) than the label says. If symptoms continue, it is time to see a doctor.
- **Be very careful about dosage recommendations, especially with children.** With liquid medicines, only use the dosing device (measuring spoon, cup or syringe) that comes with the product. Using a kitchen/soup spoon increases the risk of overdose. Give infants and children only medicines that are safe for their age and weight.
- **Avoid drug interactions.** Many medicines may interact with other medicines so it's important to ask your pharmacist or healthcare provider what products to avoid. This goes for mixing prescription and OTC products as well.

If you suspect a poisoning exposure has occurred, do not wait until symptoms occur or spend critical time looking online. Contact your local poison control center at 1-800-222-1222 to get the immediate medical help you or a loved one needs. Poison Center experts are specialized health professionals (doctors, nurses, and pharmacists) available 24/7 for emergencies, questions, concerns, or information. Services are free and confidential; callers have free access to a language line/interpretation service. New Jersey residents can reach their poison center in the following ways: call (1-800-222-1222), [text](#), or [chat](#).

For more resources about seasonal flu, visit the [New Jersey Department of Health](#) and the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention \(CDC\)](#).

If someone is unconscious, not breathing, hard to wake up, or seizing, call 9-1-1 immediately.

Help is Just a Phone Call Away!

Stay Connected: Facebook ([@NJPIES](#)) and Twitter ([@NJPoisonCenter](#)) for breaking news, safety tips, trivia questions, etc.

Real People. Real Answers.

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Available for Media Interviews

Diane P. Calello, MD, Executive and Medical Director, New Jersey Poison Control Center, Rutgers NJ Medical School's Department of Emergency Medicine

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About New Jersey Poison Control Center / NJPIES

Chartered in 1983, the New Jersey Poison Information & Education System (NJPIES) is New Jersey's only poison control center. Medical professionals such as physicians, registered nurses, and pharmacists offer free consultation through hotline services (telephone, text, and chat) regarding poison emergencies and provide information on poison prevention, drugs, food poisoning, animal bites, and more. In addition, it tracks incidences of adverse reactions to food, drugs, and vaccines to monitor for potential public health issues and provide data to the New Jersey Department of Health, U.S. Food and Drug Administration and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. NJPIES' confidential services are available 24 hours a day, seven days a week, every day of the year. When needed, NJPIES responds to other emergent health issues by expanding hotline services.

NJPIES is designated as the state's regional poison control center by the New Jersey Department of Health and the American Association of Poison Control Centers. It is a division of the Department of Emergency Medicine of Rutgers New Jersey Medical School. NJPIES has a state-of-the-art center located at Rutgers Health Sciences in Newark. NJPIES is funded, in part, by the NJ Department of Health, NJ Hospitals and the United States Department of Health and Human Services.

New Jersey residents should save the Poison Help number, 1-800-222-1222, in their mobile phones and post the number somewhere visible in their home. NJPIES is also available via text 8002221222@njpies.org and chat www.njpies.org.

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About Rutgers New Jersey Medical School

Founded in 1954, Rutgers New Jersey Medical School is the oldest school of medicine in the state. Today it is part of Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey and graduates approximately 170 physicians a year. In addition to providing the MD degree, the school offers MD/PhD, MD/MPH and MD/MBA degrees through collaborations with other institutions of higher education. Dedicated to excellence in education, research, clinical care and community outreach, the medical school comprises 20 academic departments and works with several healthcare partners, including its principal teaching hospital, University Hospital. Its faculty consists of numerous world-renowned scientists and many of the region's "top doctors." Home to the nation's oldest student-run clinic, New Jersey Medical School hosts more than 50 centers and institutes, including the Public Health Research Institute Center, the Global Tuberculosis Institute and the Neurological Institute of New Jersey. For more information please visit: njms.rutgers.edu.