



How safe is your medicine cabinet

We all have medicines of some kind at home, some of which could be dangerous if taken incorrectly. This information sheet explains how to keep your medicines safe at home and tips for keeping a well stocked but safe medicine cabinet.

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What sort of medicine cabinet should I use?

Firstly, you do not have to have a special cabinet for keeping medicines. The main points are that it should have a lock and be out of the reach of children. Some people find that a cabinet or cupboard suits their purpose, but other people find a drawer most useful.

Where should I keep my medicines?

Most people keep their medicine cabinet in the bathroom, where it can be hot and steamy. Many medicines can degrade or break down in these conditions so that they do not work so well. Another room in the house, such as the bedroom, might be a better location.



What should I keep in my medicine cabinet?

You should keep all your medicines, whether bought 'over the counter' (OTC) from a pharmacy, supermarket or other outlet, or prescribed, safely locked away in your medicine cabinet. Other products that you might not think of as medicines should also be kept out of the reach of children. These can include mouthwashes, skin creams and vitamins. All of these contain ingredients that could be dangerous if swallowed by accident.

Keep all your medicines in the original packaging, so you know who it was prescribed for and when, instructions for use and expiry date. It can be harmful to empty medicines into another container as it will be unlabelled. This could cause problems if different medicines get mixed up and are taken at the wrong time. Some medicines do not work as well once they have been removed from the packaging, such as tablets or capsules that come in blister packs or bottles. As well as showing the name of the medicine, the packaging usually protects it as well.



Basic supplies for your medicine cabinet

Everyone should keep a few basic medicines and products on hand in case a member of the family falls ill. The following suggestions will be useful for most common ailments.

- **First aid kit** – containing antiseptic wipes, plasters in a variety of shapes and sizes, medical sticky tape, gauze pads, crepe (stretchy) bandages and a triangular bandage to make a sling. You can buy small first aid kits from most pharmacies.
- **Thermometer** – It can be difficult to judge whether a child is just a bit hot or running a temperature. Measuring your child's temperature accurately will help you decide what to do next. We do not recommend using old-fashioned mercury and glass thermometers for children, as there is always a risk that they will break. You can buy strip or digital thermometers quite cheaply in most pharmacies.
- **Round ended scissors** – Always keep a pair of round-ended scissors in your medicine cabinet. They are safer than manicure scissors if you are cutting close to the skin. They are useful for cutting overlarge plasters, bandages and tape.
- **Tweezers** – These are the best way of removing splinters but should never be used to remove foreign objects from the nose, ears or eyes. This job is best left to a doctor at your local accident and emergency (A+E) department.



- **Antiseptic cream** – There are lots of different brands available and many pharmacies sell generic (own label) creams too.
- **Pain relief medicines** – You should probably keep two different types of pain relief at home, particularly if there are adults and children in the household. The most useful is paracetamol as it can be given safely to most people. It comes as tablets, soluble tablets and liquids and is safe to give to children according to the instructions on the bottle or packet. Ibuprofen is another useful pain relief medicine to keep in your medicine cabinet. Aspirin is safe for adults to take, but should never be given to children aged under 16 years unless it has been specifically prescribed for them. Talk to your pharmacist about the best types of pain relief for your family.
- **Cough and cold remedies** – There are different types of cough and cold remedy available, although all of them treat the symptoms rather than the germ that originally caused the cough or cold. Cough mixtures come in two types: expectorant, which loosens mucus so it can be coughed up, and suppressant, which stops coughing. There are special ones made especially for children. You can also buy medicines, often based on eucalyptus oil, to relieve stuffiness. Cold remedies often contain paracetamol so should not be taken at the same time as other paracetamol medicines. They come as tablets or powders in a variety of flavours.



■ **Re-hydration solution** – This is a very important treatment if someone has diarrhoea. Children can easily get dehydrated if they have diarrhoea and re-hydration solutions contain a mixture of minerals and salts to keep the body's fluids in balance. These come in a variety of flavours and many generic versions are available as well as brand name ones.

■ **Antihistamines** – These can be useful if someone in the family suffers from hay fever or allergies. Most types can be given safely to children, but check the packaging to make sure.

■ **Insect repellent** – Mosquitoes and other biting insects are becoming more common in the UK, so it is sensible to keep some insect repellent handy for the summer months. You can buy this as liquid or cream to smooth over the skin or as a spray. Some have very strong smells so you might have to try a few types before finding one you like.

■ **Sun cream or lotion** – Even though it is not that hot in the UK, sun cream or lotion is important to protect against sun damage. You can buy generic types of sun cream or lotion, which often work out cheaper than brand names, and some types come in special coloured formulations for children.

The Sun Smart website contains lots of information about staying safe in the sun. Visit the website at www.cancerresearchuk.org/sunsmart/

■ **Travel sickness medicines** – Most children (and some adults) get travel sick at some point in life. There are various types available, either as tablets or liquids. You can also buy some wristbands that work by putting pressure on the wrist, reducing feelings of sickness. Ask your pharmacist for advice on the best travel sickness remedy for your family.

Have a regular clear out

Do not hoard medicines after you have finished with them. Many medicines 'go off' after a while and all packaging should contain an expiry date. Every so often, perhaps every three months, go through your medicine cabinet and remove anything that is past its expiry date. Return these to the pharmacist for safe disposal. Do not flush them down the toilet or throw them away.

Any questions?

If your child is a patient at GOSH and you would like to know more about his or her medicines, please call in to the Pharmacy or telephone us on 020 7829 8608.

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