

Over-the-counter (OTC) medicines

Key facts

- Over the counter (OTC) medicines are medicines you can buy without a prescription.
- You can buy some medicines from a supermarket or a health food store.
- There are other medicines that you can only buy from a pharmacy.
- Speak to a pharmacist for advice before buying a medicine to check if it's suitable for you.
- Like prescription medicines, OTC medicines can have side effects or drug interactions.

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What are over-the-counter (OTC) medicines?

You don't need a prescription for some medicines. These are called over-the-counter medicines, or OTC medicines. OTC medicines are used for mild health problems such as:

- headache
- sore throat
- runny nose and [sneezing](#)
- fever
- fungal infection
- upset stomach
- dry eyes

Like all [medicines](#), you should think about the risks and benefits before using OTC medicines. Ask the pharmacist for advice.

Types of over-the-counter medicines

In Australia, over-the-counter medicines can be supplied in 3 ways:

1. general sale
2. pharmacy medicines
3. pharmacist only medicines

Medicines for general sale

You can buy some medicines in supermarkets and health food stores. Examples of these are:

- small packs of [pain relief medicines](#) such as [paracetamol](#) and [ibuprofen](#)
- [vitamins](#)
- [complementary or alternative medicines](#)
- [sore throat](#) lozenges
- first aid creams for grazes and insect bites

Pharmacy medicines

There are other over-the-counter medicines that you can only buy in a pharmacy. You can find pharmacy medicines on the shelves in the main part of the shop.

Examples of these are:

- [cough and cold remedies](#)
- [antihistamines](#)
- medicines for heartburn and [reflux](#)
- medicines to treat [diarrhoea](#)

Pharmacist-only medicines

There are some over-the-counter medicines you can only buy after you have spoken to the [pharmacist](#). This is a legal requirement to sell a [Schedule 3](#) medicine. Pharmacist-only medicines are stored behind the pharmacy counter. You will need to ask for them.

Examples of these are:

- [inhalers \(puffers\)](#) for [asthma](#) relief
- mild steroid-containing creams for skin irritations
- the [emergency contraceptive pill](#)

Some treatments for colds and flu are also pharmacist-only medicines.

Pharmacists are qualified experts in medicines. Pharmacy staff can give you advice on your health.

What are the risks of taking over-the-counter medicines?

Just like any other medicines, OTC medicines can cause [side effects](#). For example, there are some over-the-counter pain medicines you shouldn't use if you have other health conditions.

Talk to the pharmacist first if you have stomach, kidney, [liver](#) or [heart problems](#), or are [pregnant](#).

Some over-the-counter medicines and alternative medicines can interact with medicines prescribed by your doctor. Interactions may stop your medicines from working as expected.

If you take a combination of medicines, including OTC medicines, you may be more likely to have side effects.

Always let your doctor or pharmacist know what prescription, over-the-counter and alternative or complementary medicines you are taking.

WRITE T OR F (TRUE OR FALSE)

- **You need a prescription to buy all over-the-counter (OTC) medicines.**
- **You can buy some OTC medicines in supermarkets or health food stores.**
- **Only doctors are allowed to give advice about OTC medicines.**
- **OTC medicines can cause side effects or interact with other medicines.**
- **Paracetamol and vitamins are examples of general sale medicines.**
- **Pharmacist-only medicines are available on the open shelves of pharmacies.**
- **In Australia, there are three categories of OTC medicines.**
- **All cold and flu treatments are general sale medicines.**

- It is not necessary to inform your doctor about OTC medicines you are using.

False

- Pharmacists are trained experts who can give advice about OTC medicines.

True