

## 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**