



What is in your first-aid medicine cupboard?

Wilna Rabbets
Amayeza Information Services, South Africa

Introduction

Having the right medications and medical supplies available can make a world of difference when you are in need. Someone will need that pain and fever or nausea medication in the middle of the night, over a long weekend, when even the emergency pharmacy is closed.

When a customer comes into the pharmacy requesting assistance with stocking their medicine cupboard, it is an excellent opportunity to make sure they know how to use all their medication and that they check the medicines' expiry dates every couple of months. Remind them that bringing all their expired or old medications to the pharmacy is the best way to dispose of them.

The most useful items in a medicine cupboard should include something for pain and fever, cuts, grazes and burns, something for all the stomach ailments that can occur, and something for colds and flu.

Pain and fever

Dos and don'ts for treating pain and fever

- Stay hydrated and drink lots of clear fluids.
- Remove excess clothing during a fever.
- Know how to take medication correctly – how and when.
- Do not change the dose or dosage frequency of the medicines.
- Do not take pain medication with alcohol or recreational drugs.
- Check that pain medicines can be taken with the prescription medication that the patient is already taking.

- Do not give aspirin to a child under the age of 16 years.
- Remember that nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) should usually be taken with food.

Refer to a doctor

- If the fever or pain is accompanied by a stiff neck, confusion, irritability, or a rash
- A fever remaining above 39.5 °C for longer than two hours after home treatment
- A fever lasting longer than two days
- Photophobia or light sensitivity that develops
- Dehydration presenting as less urine, sunken eyes, and no tears
- Seizures that occur
- Sudden or severe pain of unknown origin
- Pain that spreads down one or both legs, especially if it goes past the knees
- Pain with weakness, numbness, or tingling in one or both legs

Treating pain and fever at home

Paracetamol and many NSAIDs are available over-the-counter (OTC), on their own or in combination, to treat pain and fever. Make sure to include paediatric formulations when there are children in the family.

Stomach ailments

These include nausea and vomiting, diarrhoea, indigestion, bloating, stomach cramps and constipation. While many of the dos and don'ts apply to all these ailments, some are more specific.

Dos and don'ts for treating nausea, vomiting and diarrhoea

- Make sure to stay well hydrated by drinking plenty of clear liquids, water and sports drinks, which replace lost electrolytes. Recommend small sips of fluids regularly, as large amounts of

fluid may make the symptoms worse. Sucking on ice chips is also helpful.

- Avoid dairy and citrus juices.
- Do not resume a normal diet until a bland diet is well tolerated.
- Retake medication if vomiting occurs within 30 minutes of taking oral medications and take extra precautions if vomiting occurs after taking oral contraceptives.

Refer to a doctor

- If signs of dehydration occur, for example, lightheadedness, decreased urination (no urination at least every eight hours) or severe fatigue
- Fever accompanied by abdominal pain
- If the patient cannot keep any food or liquids down for more than 24 hours
- Diarrhoea for more than three days or without gradual improvement over five days
- Bloody diarrhoea
- If the patient is unable to take usual prescription medications
- Any ailment that persists

Treating stomach ailments

Some home remedies are available, such as taking mint and/or ginger. A cool compress behind the neck for nausea or a heating pad on the stomach for cramping can help alleviate discomfort.

Cuts, grazes and burns

Minor cuts, grazes and burns frequently occur at home or on holiday and are easily treated with OTC medication and ointments. Infection and worsening of the injury can occur if the wound is not adequately cleaned and treated.

Dos and don'ts for cuts, grazes and burns

- Firstly, the wound should be staunched, cleaned, and then assessed. Clean a minor injury under drinking-quality running water or using sterile wipes. Then pat dry with a clean towel or sterile gauze. Clean around the wound with soap and water, taking care to wipe away from the wound.
- For cuts, elevate the injured part above heart level where possible. Apply a sterile dressing or plaster.
- Ice is not recommended as an initial treatment for burns, but soaking in cool water is fine.
- Do not use any food-based products like butter on the burn as this could cause infection or make it more difficult to clean.
- Use antibiotic ointments and keep burn wounds covered as burns heal better in moist, covered environments.

Refer to a doctor

- If a wound will not stop bleeding
- If a foreign object is embedded in the wound
- If it looks like the wound has become infected
- If the wound is from a human or animal bite

- Any burn wound that has more than just superficial damage
- If the burn is over a large part of the body or goes all the way around a limb

Treating minor wounds

It is essential to advise the patient to make sure their tetanus vaccination is up to date as some wounds may be caused by objects that are contaminated with dirt, faeces, or saliva. Pain medication can help relieve discomfort, and some antibiotic ointments are available OTC.

Other medications that are useful to include in the first-aid cupboard

- Antihistamine tablets to relieve allergies and a topical antihistamine cream for insect bites and stings.
- Saline eye drops for dry or itchy eyes. Saline to rinse out the eye in cases where something gets into an eye.
- Oral rehydration sachets containing electrolytes.
- Sore throat soothers that can be used in conjunction with pain medication.
- Decongestant for a stuffy nose in spray form.
- Decongestant/analgesic combination for symptomatic relief of colds and flu.
- Antacids for indigestion.
- Sterile gauze, bandages, and plasters.

Conclusion

Remember, always check, and follow dosage instructions as indicated on the package insert. Be especially careful when administering medicine to children. Check the medicine in the cupboard every six months to ensure that all the essentials are in place and have not expired. It is also advised that the medicine be kept in a cool and dry place (not in the bathroom or kitchen) and out of reach of children.

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