

POISONology

SAFETY & FIRST AID TIPS FROM THE ARIZONA POISON AND DRUG INFORMATION CENTER

Acetaminophen can be harmful when taken in high doses



Acetaminophen (aka APAP, Paracetamol or Tylenol®) is a medication used to treat pain and fever. Not long ago it was in the news for its potential to harm our bodies. It can be toxic in the wrong dose. **While acetaminophen has been used for years safely, it is also known to cause liver damage and liver failure.** The dose it takes to cause liver damage is well understood for both adults and children. Liver damage can occur from acute (one time dose) or chronic (repeated doses over days) overdosing.

Acute overdose (a single, one-time large dose) can cause liver damage but the signs of liver damage are delayed 1-2 days. Once the signs of liver damage start (nausea, vomiting, abdominal pain), treatment is difficult.

Chronic overdose (large amounts over days) can also cause liver damage. Signs of damage can be abdominal pain, nausea, and vomiting, yellow skin. Chronic overdose is more common from people taking APAP from more than one product (often unknowingly). APAP is found in many over-the-counter cough and cold medications, sleeping medications and prescription pain medications. **If you aren't aware of this added ingredient and take additional Tylenol or APAP in other forms with your cough medicine or sleep aid, you could overdose on APAP.** Be very aware of the ingredients in the medicine bottles, not just the symptoms they treat. Unfortunately the physical damage, especially to the liver, caused by too much APAP cannot be felt immediately. You won't know about the irreversible harm until you are really getting severe symptoms.

It is very confusing to walk into a pharmacy and see so many medicines to treat your cold symptoms. It is more important to know the ingredients inside each bottle and less important to know what symptoms the bottle advertises treating. **APAP is the most common medication to be found in over-the-counter medications and can easily be taken by mistake.** Always ask your physician, pharmacist or poison center for information about dosing and how much is too much.

If you have other poisoning concerns or questions call the toll-free national hotline at 1-800-222-1222 to reach your local poison center. If you live in Arizona outside of Maricopa County, this number will get you to our experts at the Arizona Poison and Drug Information Center in Tucson.