

Script – Broadcast – Choosing between ibuprofen and acetaminophen

INTRO

Whenever you feel a headache coming on or you tweak your back, it's common to reach into the medicine cabinet for a couple of acetaminophens (Tylenol) or ibuprofen (Advil). But does it matter which one you take? And is there anything wrong with taking both to fight off what ails you?

Acetaminophen is an analgesic, which is a type of drug that reduces pain signals within your nervous system. It's used to treat discomfort like headaches and joint pain, and to reduce fever. Ibuprofen is a nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drug (NSAID) that is typically used to tackle issues such as back pain, menstrual cramps and toothaches. It also works to decrease fever.

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But each pain reliever comes with its own risks. Acetaminophen is typically safer to use for most people. Some side effects include nausea, vomiting and headache. But it's a drug that's absorbed by your liver so it's not the best option for people with liver problems.

The side effects of ibuprofen include heartburn, nausea and stomach pain (it's important to take it with food). Taking ibuprofen for a long time or at high doses can increase the risk of blood clots, kidney damage and ulcers.

Sarah Sheley is a pharmacist with OSF HealthCare.

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Sarah Sheley, pharmacist, OSF HealthCare

"With ibuprofen there is more concern with patients using it if they had renal insufficiency, heart failure, GI (gastrointestinal) issues like Crohn's or IBS; they could cause a lot of irritation in the GI tract or stomach." (:14)

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Since the two pain relievers work differently, Sheley says it's fine for most adults to use them interchangeably. She adds that the most important tip is to know why you're taking a particular pain reliever and don't overdo it. The recommended maximum dosage for adults is 3,000 milligrams a day for acetaminophen and 2,400 milligrams a day if you're taking ibuprofen.

Additionally, other factors such as your medical history and underlying cause of pain also help determine which pain reliever is best for you.

Sheley says that acetaminophen and ibuprofen are appropriate choices for children with fevers. However, stick with acetaminophen for infants 3 months or younger. The correct dose for your child is based on their weight, not their age. Do not guess their weight — acetaminophen and ibuprofen can be dangerous when given in the wrong dose. Check with your pediatrician before giving your child any pain relievers.

Be aware that ibuprofen and acetaminophen can have a negative interaction with some prescription and over-the-counter drugs. If you have any concerns or questions, consult with your primary care provider or your pharmacist.