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When Hit with Pain, Americans May Risk Overdose
Doctors Caution Against Misusing OTCs to Prevent GI Complications

Bethesda, MD (Sept. 1, 2016) — Millions of Americans suffering from occasional and chronic pain may be taking too much over-the-counter medication to relieve some of their symptoms, including headaches, back pain and muscle pain. September marks Pain Awareness Month and the American Gastroenterological Association (AGA) is urging consumers who use over-the-counter (OTC) pain medicines to be aware of common myths and dangerous misconceptions about their use.

According to an AGA survey, conducted with support from McNeil Consumer Healthcare, 39 percent of adults acknowledge they have knowingly taken more than the recommended dose of an OTC pain medicine, a practice that puts them at risk of severe overdose complications, such as stomach bleeding, ulcers, liver damage and even death.

“Patients are confident they can self-manage their medicines, but it’s not as simple as it seems,” said [Byron Cryer, MD](#), chair, AGA Gut Check campaign, and associate dean of The University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center, Dallas. “Time and again, gastroenterologists are seeing a significant number of patients with overdose complications, because they did not follow the dosing directions.”

Chronic pain affects about 100 million American adults, according to the [Institute of Medicine](#), and AGA explored their knowledge of pain-relief information by commissioning [Gut Check: Know Your Medicine](#), a nationwide survey conducted online by Harris Poll in September-October 2015 among 1,015 U.S. adults age 30 and over and 251 U.S. gastroenterologists.

For Pain Awareness Month, AGA outlines common myths, as identified by the survey, and helpful facts in an effort to keep patients and families safe from OTC pain medicine overdose complications.

Myth #1: *Drug labels are just guidelines*

Many consumers believe they know how to best treat their pain when it comes to reaching for the medicine cabinet, with 40 percent admitting they perceive the dosing directions on OTC pain medicines as *just guidelines* — they know what works for them.

American consumers take appropriate safety measures in many aspects of their lives. Most people always wear a seat belt when riding in a car (91 percent), currently have smoke detectors in their home (93 percent), and have anti-virus software on their computers (82 percent). Yet, only 32 percent of people say they always read the drug facts label on an OTC pain medicine they haven’t taken before, which can be a costly or even fatal oversight.

Fact: Medicine labels can change periodically, as can health conditions and situations. Read and follow the drug facts label — *every time* — including maximum daily dosage and warnings, to avoid potential overdose complications.

Myth #2: *Taking more than the recommended dose is harmless*

One in four Americans (26 percent) are willing to take more than the recommended dose of OTC pain medicines, because they believe their symptoms will go away faster. While patients might exceed the recommended dose for weeks or even months without complications, it can take just one occurrence to put them in the hospital.

Fact: Taking more than the recommended dose will not lead to quicker pain relief. Patients should work with their health-care professional on the proper dosage and treatment for their individual health situation.

Myth #3: *Mixing medicines is safe and effective*

On average, a gastroenterologist sees 90 overdose cases per year due to OTC pain medicine. Most gastroenterologists (64 percent) report that their patients were unaware of the risks of taking more than directed and, when overdose complications arise, the mistake often involves taking two or more medicines with the same active ingredients at a time. Many consumers (48 percent) are unaware that both acetaminophen and NSAIDs (nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs) are present in more than 1,400 OTC and prescription medicines.

Fact: Mixing medicines is dangerous — overuse of NSAIDs can cause stomach bleeding, stomach ulcers, and damage to the esophagus and small intestine, while overdosing on acetaminophen can cause liver damage. Take only one product at a time containing the same kind of active ingredient.

“Often times, overdose complications are unrecognizable. By educating yourself on the safe use of medicines — from OTCs to prescriptions to vitamins and supplements — you can avoid the harmful complications associated with overdose before it’s too late,” said Dr. Cryer.

AGA encourages Americans living with pain to get relief safely. Patients need to read medicine labels every time they take an OTC pain medicine. If patients are still not receiving relief from their pain with the maximum daily dose, they should work with a health-care professional to effectively manage their pain.

“Communication is key,” added Dr. Cryer. “Not reading medicine labels combined with age, current health conditions, medical history, alcohol intake and use of other medications are just a few of the potential risk factors that can lead patients to unwittingly may take multiple medications with the same kind of ingredient at a time to manage the pain and may lead to complications. Patients should talk to their doctor about *all* their medicines they are taking, and doctors should initiate the conversation at each visit.”

Visit GutCheckFacts.org to learn more.

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About the Campaign

[Gut Check: Know Your Medicine](#) is an educational campaign created by the American Gastroenterological Association, with sponsorship support from McNeil Consumer Healthcare, to motivate and encourage individuals to engage in the safe use of OTC pain medicine.

Survey Method

The *Gut Check: Know Your Medicine Survey* was conducted online by Harris Poll on behalf of the American Gastroenterological Association from Sept. 30 through Oct. 8, 2015, among 1,015 U.S. adults aged 30+ (“consumers”), including 479 who currently experience chronic pain (“chronic pain

sufferers”), and 251 licensed gastroenterologists who are office- or clinic-based and see adult patients ages 18 years or older (“gastroenterologists”). The American Gastroenterological Association commissioned this survey with sponsorship support from McNeil Consumer Healthcare. For complete research method, including subgroup sample sizes and weighting variables, please contact [Stephanie Wight](#).

About the AGA Institute

The American Gastroenterological Association is the trusted voice of the GI community. Founded in 1897, the AGA has grown to more than 16,000 members from around the globe who are involved in all aspects of the science, practice and advancement of gastroenterology. The AGA Institute administers the practice, research and educational programs of the organization
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