

The New Jersey Poison Control Center — Serving New Jersey Since 1983

## HEALTH ADVISORY

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### Acetaminophen Overdose Alert State's Poison Control Center Warns Too Much Acetaminophen Can Be Toxic

Over a two-day period in January, the New Jersey Poison Center assisted in the medical care of several New Jersey patients who accidentally took too much acetaminophen while treating flu-like symptoms. Each patient is currently receiving antidotal therapy to prevent liver failure and death.

"Cold and flu season is the time of year when we see an uptick in calls at the Poison Control Center related to the overuse of acetaminophen to alleviate flu-like symptoms," said Diane Calello, executive and medical director of the [New Jersey Poison Control Center at Rutgers New Jersey Medical School](#). "Most people don't realize they're at risk of overusing acetaminophen because they're unaware so many medicines contain this ingredient. There are more than 600 products on the market that contain acetaminophen."

Acetaminophen, the active ingredient in Tylenol and many prescription pain medicines and over-the-counter (OTC) cough, cold and fever-reducing products - is safe and effective when used carefully and correctly and not more than the maximum recommended daily limit of 4,000 milligrams of acetaminophen. However, taking too much acetaminophen, either alone or in combination with other medicines, can lead to serious health effects.

"Overdoing it is much easier than most realize, and the consequences of taking too much acetaminophen can happen quickly and lead to a life-threatening emergency like severe liver damage and liver failure, kidney failure, and death," said Bruce Ruck, managing director of the New Jersey Poison Control Center.

"We want to stress that adults should never take more than the maximum daily limit of 4,000 milligrams of acetaminophen per day from all medicines combined in a 24-hour period," Calello said. "It's also important to make sure you're not taking multiple doses of acetaminophen too close together as this can also lead to overdose and liver damage."

Infants and children are also at risk of accidental acetaminophen overdose since many children's products contain acetaminophen. It takes much less acetaminophen to cause serious health

effects in children. “When giving medicine to children, especially young children, give the amount of medicine recommended for their weight, not their age,” Ruck said.

“We realize most people aren’t aware of the harm that can result from overusing acetaminophen, so we’re raising awareness to prevent accidental overdoses,” Calello said. “We want people to be aware of the risks and to know how to use acetaminophen safely.”

Follow these steps to prevent overusing acetaminophen:

- **Choose targeted products:** Only use medicines designed to treat your symptoms.
- **Check the active ingredients:** Review the active ingredients in all the products you’re using to avoid doubling up on ingredients, especially acetaminophen. Be mindful of the total milligrams of acetaminophen you consume from all sources in 24 hours. Do not exceed the recommended daily dose.
- **Avoid combining medicines and products:** Do not take more than one OTC product containing acetaminophen at the same time or within a short period of time.
- **Follow the directions on the label:** Carefully read the warnings and dosing directions on the label, insert, or product packaging before taking or giving medicine.

Although acetaminophen overdose is one of the most common poisonings, recognizing symptoms is often difficult. Not only can symptoms be vague — loss of appetite, nausea, stomach pain, and vomiting — symptoms do not always appear within 24 hours. Some people may not experience symptoms for a few days, and by then symptoms are life-threatening.

If you suspect you have used too much acetaminophen, calling the New Jersey Poison Control Center is the quickest way to get the medical help you need. The poison center’s specialists are available 24/7. Anyone can call for medical help – children, teenagers and adults.

Poison control centers are a medical resource for the public and healthcare providers. Get help 24/7: Call the Poison Help line at 1-800-222-1222 or [start an online chat](#). If someone is not breathing, hard to wake, or having a seizure, call 9-1-1.

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**Available for Media Interviews**

Diane Calello, MD, Executive and Medical Director, New Jersey Poison Control Center, Rutgers NJ Medical School’s Department of Emergency Medicine

Bruce Ruck, Pharm.D., Managing Director, New Jersey Poison Control Center, Rutgers NJ Medical School’s Department of Emergency Medicine

**About New Jersey Poison Control Center/NJPIES, 1-800-222-1222**

Chartered in 1983, the New Jersey Poison Information & Education System (NJPIES), known to the public as the New Jersey Poison Control Center, is the state's primary defense against injury and deaths from intentional and unintentional poisonings. It is designated as the state's regional poison control center by the New Jersey Department of Health and the American Association of Poison Control Centers. It is a division of the Department of Emergency Medicine at Rutgers New Jersey Medical School. NJPIES has a state-of-the-art center located at Rutgers Health in Newark. NJPIES is funded, in part, by the NJ Department of Health, NJ Hospitals and the United States Department of Health and Human Services.

Hotline staff (physicians, registered nurses, and pharmacists) provide free telemedicine consultation through hotline services (telephone, text, chat) regarding poison emergencies and provide information on poison prevention practices, drug interactions and overdoses, food poisoning, environmental chemical exposures, animal/insect bites and stings, plant and other outdoor exposures, carbon monoxide and lead poisonings, and more. NJPIES' services are free, confidential/private, available 24/7, and help is available in any language. Call 1-800-222-1222 or [Chat Here](#).

**About Rutgers New Jersey Medical School**

Founded in 1954, Rutgers New Jersey Medical School is the oldest school of medicine in the state. Today it is part of Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey and graduates approximately 170 physicians a year. In addition to providing the MD degree, the school offers MD/PhD, MD/MPH, and MD/MBA degrees through collaborations with other institutions of higher education. Dedicated to excellence in education, research, clinical care and community outreach, the medical school comprises 20 academic departments and works with several healthcare partners, including its principal teaching hospital, University Hospital. Its faculty consists of numerous world-renowned scientists and many of the region's "top doctors." Home to the nation's oldest student-run clinic, New Jersey Medical School hosts more than 50 centers and institutes, including the Public Health Research Institute Center, the Global Tuberculosis Institute and the Neurological Institute of New Jersey. For more information, please visit [njms.rutgers.edu](http://njms.rutgers.edu).

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