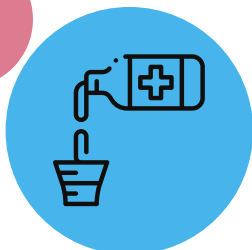
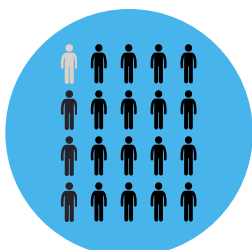


# Substances At A Glance: Over-The-Counter Medication

*Dextromethorphan is now used in cold syrups to replace codeine, normally used to reduce cough as well.<sup>1</sup>*



**What are OTC medications?** Over The Counter (OTC) medications are intended to treat a wide range of symptoms related to minor illnesses. Many contain the active ingredient dextromethorphan (DXM) while some others contain the opioid codeine. These products are easily available and can be purchased without a prescription at supermarkets, drugstores, and convenience stores.



**Non-medical OTC use among youth:** In Canada, 5.7% of students in grades 7-12 report using DXM to get high, while 5% report using sleeping medicines and 4% using Gravol to get high.<sup>2</sup> Unlike most other drugs used non-medically, high school age students report using OTC's to get high at a higher rate than post-secondary students (3.9%).<sup>3</sup>



**Why do young people use OTC's?** Over the counter medications can serve a wide variety of purposes such as relieving headaches, sinus pressure and cold/flu symptoms. Other OTC's include laxatives, sleep aids, diet pills and diuretics. Some youth choose to use medications with DXM in order to feel high, or others may use laxatives or diuretics and diet pills to achieve an ideal weight without medical support. Since these products are legal and available without a prescription, they may be perceived as more safe than alcohol or other drugs.



**Short term effects:** The effects of OTC's vary based on the amount and type of product used. Beyond their medical purposes, OTC's can sometimes cause impaired judgment, nausea, loss of coordination, headache, vomiting, loss of consciousness, numbness of fingers and toes, abdominal pain, irregular heartbeat, aches, seizures, panic attacks, psychosis, euphoria, cold flashes, dizziness and diarrhea.



**OTC's and Alcohol:** Mixing alcohol with certain medications can cause nausea and vomiting, headaches, drowsiness, fainting, and loss of coordination. It can put users at risk for internal bleeding, heart problems, liver damage and difficulties in breathing. Alcohol also can decrease the effectiveness of many medications or make them totally ineffective. OTC's may also include herbal remedies and other ingredients you may never have suspected of reacting negatively with alcohol.

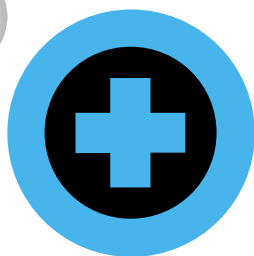


Get more information about over the counter medications on [our website](#).



# Substances At A Glance: Over-The-Counter Medication

*In a 2022 DFK study, 23% of Canadians surveyed reported having cough or cold medicines with codeine or Dextromethorphan at home.<sup>4</sup>*



**What are the risks of OTC medication use?** OTC medications containing codeine can cause risks associated with opioid use, including addiction, slowed breathing, weakness/heaviness of the limbs, confusion and loss of consciousness.<sup>5</sup> Side effects of recreational dextromethorphan use depends on how much a person takes. Taking large doses can cause mania, delirium, hallucinations and psychotic episodes.<sup>1</sup>



**Can a person overdose on OTC medications?** Overdose is possible! The point at which a young person may overdose on OTC medications varies depending on the amount of the drugs they took, over what time period, and if other drugs were involved. Some OTC's are less potent and cause minor distress, while others are very strong and can cause more serious problems. If your teen is unresponsive, and you suspect an accidental overdose of OTC drugs, call emergency services immediately.



**How can someone reduce the risks of OTC Medication use?** Use of OTC medications should be as directed on the packaging for medical reasons only. Non-prescription cold and cough medications containing certain active ingredients (including Dextromethorphan) are not to be used by children under age six.<sup>6</sup> If the product causes drowsiness or fatigue, avoid driving or ask someone you trust to drive for you if you need to travel.



**How can I help my kids understand the risks of OTC Medications?** Parents play a crucial role in discussing safe use of these medicines with their kids. It's important to establish clear goals together, remain positive, keep an open mind. In conversations, stay calm and be conscious about your own body language. Make sure to communicate any concerns you may have while also giving time to your kids to speak; listen to them carefully and keep the conversation going with open-ended questions.



**August is National Drug Drop Off Month.** An initiative led by Drug Free Kids Canada highlighting the issue of teen misuse of prescription drugs, National Drug Drop Off Month emphasizes the need for Canadians to clear their households of any unused and expired prescription drugs, as well as over-the-counter (OTC) medicines, and to drop them off at their local pharmacy for environmentally safe disposal.

## Reference List

1. Drug Free Kids Canada, 2021. [Dextromethorphan, Let's Talk About It!](#)
2. Health Canada, 2023. [Canadian Student Tobacco Alcohol and Drugs Survey 2021-2022.](#)
3. Health Canada, 2021. [Canadian Post-Secondary Alcohol and Drugs Survey 2019-2020.](#)
4. Drug Free Kids Canada, 2022. Tracking Study.
5. Government of Canada, 2023. [Codeine.](#)
6. Government of Canada, 2022. [Concerns About Children's Medication.](#)