

Pre-reading Question: Have you seen any ads on TV for medications? Which ones? Do you think these ads are effective?

Reading the Media's Messages About Medications

Do the messages we receive from the media help us when we need relief from allergies or a cold or are they just hype?

The lady on TV has a throbbing sinus headache. She reaches for a bottle of a well-known pain reliever, and presto -- she's out in the garden smiling and planting flowers. Switch channels.

A middle-aged man lies in bed flattened sick with the flu. His eyes droop. His nose is red. He's stuffy, groggy, and miserable. He opens the medicine cabinet and spots the box of a nighttime cold remedy. Soon, he's resting comfortably, his smiling face nestled in the pillow.

You open your favorite magazine and see a distressed Gen-Xer wondering what to do about an unsightly, blotchy rash. Turn the page, and this time she's admiring how clear and perfect her skin is, thanks to a cream "recommended most by doctors."

You get the picture. The cure for everything, according to the commercials on TV, is just around the corner at your local drugstore. If only it were only so simple.

The truth is, taking medications is serious business. "No one should use over-the-counter (OTC) medications unless they really have to," says Michael Montagne, professor at the Massachusetts College of Pharmacy in Boston. "Just because a drug is available over the counter doesn't mean it works or has no side effects," he explains. "On the contrary, you need to be as cautious about taking it as you are about drugs prescribed by your doctor."

Although prescription drugs may have more serious side effects than OTC medications, all drugs affect the body in some way. They can sap your energy, upset your stomach, dull your senses, or alter your appetite. The same drug can affect different people in different ways. "You shouldn't use OTCs without some *medical* supervision," says Dr. Montagne. "The difference between a prescription drug and a nonprescription drug is just its legal status."

Pill-Popping Nation

Pharmaceuticals are a multibillion-dollar industry. Drug company salespeople used to pitch the latest drugs only to doctors and nurses. Now drug companies make their pitches directly to consumers through advertising. Whether it's an ad for a cold medicine or one promising to clear up your skin in 24 hours, Americans are bombarded with drug information. "Even Saturday morning TV is full of commercials for vitamins and herbal remedies," says Dr. Montagne. Pills that work like magic on TV don't always work in real life. Still, ads for medications can be useful. They may alert you to symptoms that need a doctor's attention, tell you about a treatment you didn't know about, or introduce you to a new product. Like all advertising, drug ads exist to get you to buy something. That's why it's helpful to know some tactics that advertisers use.

Reading the Media's Messages About Medications, continuedThe Truth, the Whole Truth, and Nothing but the Truth?

Some drug ads, for example, promise more than they can deliver. “There are no nonprescription drugs that cure,” says Dr. Montagne. “They treat symptoms.” Even products whose producers claim will work day and night aren’t going to eliminate all of your symptoms. Drugs promising instant or fast relief won’t necessarily do what they say. “Your body needs time,” says Dr. Montagne. “Our bodies are complex systems. Problems cannot be solved in 24 hours.”

Advertisements may also leave out information or put it in hard-to-read fine print at the bottom of the screen or page. “If you’re going to take over-the-counter medications,” says Dr. Montagne, “read the label carefully and get the information you need from a pharmacist.” Reading the label is important for another reason, too. Drugs contain more than one ingredient. If you’re taking one thing for colds and another to calm your cough, and both have the same ingredient, you could be getting too much of that drug.

An advertiser may claim its product is better because it’s loaded with several ingredients. All-in-one cold and allergy remedies are a good example. They may contain antihistamines, which work against allergies but do nothing for a cold. Most antihistamines can cause drowsiness, while many decongestants have the opposite effect. Still, it’s hard to predict whether a product will make you sleepy, keep you awake, or do neither, because reactions to drugs can vary from one person to another.

Sometimes a medicine contains ingredients that have conflicting effects. Cold remedies, for example, may have one ingredient to make it easier to cough up phlegm and other ingredients that stop the urge to cough. Ask a doctor or pharmacist about choosing a product that has a single ingredient that targets your specific symptoms.

Some ads try to convince you to take a drug for a problem you don’t even have. “It’s really important to ask yourself why you’re considering using a certain drug before you start taking it,” says Dr. Montagne. “Ask yourself if its benefits match your symptoms. If your problem is a headache, why take a cough medicine at the same time?” He also urges teenagers to monitor how they are using medications (at what dosage) and to have a clear idea of when they’ll stop. OTCs should not be used any longer than the package directions advise. “Dependence can happen with almost any drug,” he says. When you put a drug into your body, you’re altering your system. When you remove that chemical, your body has to readjust.

Reading the Media's Messages About Medications, continuedRisky Business

Because they are easily available, OTC drugs may seem harmless. But they're not.

Many drugs you could once get only from a doctor are now available over the counter, Dr. Montagne explains. Because they aren't as strong as prescription drugs, people think they can take as much as they want. Sometimes they double the dose, thinking the drug will work better or make them feel better faster. "The higher the dose, the greater the toxicity [the danger of poisoning]," says Dr. Montagne. "Even at low doses, there can be problems."

So what are the media's messages about medications? Since the purpose of these messages is to sell you a product, think before you buy into the pitch. Take a good look at what you need. Then decide whether that medication will help your symptoms.

By Sheila Globus

Reading the Media's Messages About Medications, continued**TEST YOUR KNOW-HOW ABOUT MEDICAL MYTHS**

Before reading the fact, see if you can determine why the statement is false.

MYTH: *Nasal sprays are harmless, so you can use them as much as you want.*

FACT: Nasal sprays constrict the blood vessels. Using them too much can make a stuffy nose worse than ever.

MYTH: *When you have a cold, it's good to use a medicine that keeps you from coughing.*

FACT: A cough is a reflex to help you get rid of substances that block the airways. Drugs that keep you from coughing prevent that from happening. They may help if you have a "dry" cough that isn't bringing up any phlegm.

MYTH: *Ointments and medications that you rub into your skin don't really get into your body.*

FACT: Drugs that you swallow go through detoxification in your liver, stomach, and kidneys. Drugs applied to the skin go directly into your bloodstream. People who are allergic to foods or other substances should be especially careful about using painkillers applied to the skin because of the speed at which they get into the bloodstream.

MYTH: *You should stop taking an antibiotic when you feel better.*

FACT: If your doctor prescribes an antibiotic, take it for as long as is indicated. Stopping too soon may make disease-causing bacteria harder to fight.

MYTH: *You should store medicines in the bathroom medicine cabinet.*

FACT: Medicines are best kept in a cool, dry place. And get rid of the cotton stuffing, which attracts moisture into the container.

MYTH: *If you don't get a rash after taking a drug for the first time, you don't have an allergy to it.*

FACT: Your body has to get sensitized first. You could break out in a rash after taking a drug for several days.

MYTH: *Aspirin is better than acetaminophen, especially for teenagers.*

FACT: Teens should not take products containing aspirin or salicylates when they have chicken pox, flu, or flu-like symptoms. It can lead to a rare, life-threatening condition called Reye's syndrome. Symptoms include fatigue, severe headache, disorientation, and excessive vomiting -- and in rare cases, death.

MYTH: *Over-the-counter drugs are safer than prescription drugs because they don't cause side effects.*

FACT: Any drug can cause problems in some people. Be cautious. Always read the label and follow the directions carefully, especially if you're taking more than one medication or if you're taking a prescription at the same time as an OTC drug. Ask your doctor or pharmacist for advice before taking any drug that you haven't taken before.