

# Right and Wrong Uses of Modern Medicines

CHAPTER

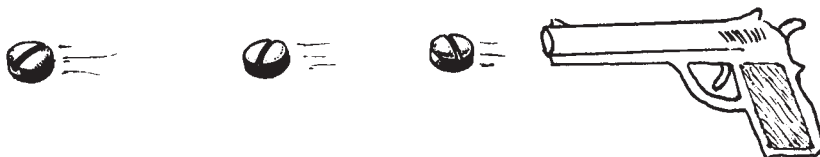
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Medicines can treat dangerous illnesses, manage health conditions, and save lives, but only when people can get them and use them correctly. When medicines are sold that do not work, or when useful medicines are used the wrong way, medicines can do more harm than good.

Some doctors and health workers recommend or prescribe incorrect medicines or medicines when they are not needed. This can harm a person immediately and it can make a medicine work less well in the future.

**There is some danger in the use of any medicine.**

Some medicines are much more dangerous than others. Unfortunately, people sometimes use very dangerous medicines for mild sicknesses. Instead of curing an illness, this may even cause death. Never use a dangerous medicine for a mild illness. (For more about using medicines, see the Brown Pages w18 and w19.)



REMEMBER: *MEDICINES CAN KILL*

## Guidelines for the use of medicine:

1. Use medicines only when necessary.
2. Know the correct use and precautions for any medicine you use (see the Green Pages).
3. Be sure to use the right dose.
4. If the medicine does not help, or causes problems, stop using it.
5. When in doubt, seek the advice of a health worker.

**Note:** One of the reasons some health workers and doctors give medicine when none is needed is because they think patients expect medicine and will not be satisfied until they get some. Tell your doctor or health worker you only want medicine if it is definitely needed. This will save you money and be safer for your health.

**Only use a medicine when you are sure it is needed  
and when you are sure how to use it.**

## THE MOST DANGEROUS MISUSE OF MEDICINE

Here are some dangerous errors people make in using modern medicines. The improper use of the following medicines causes many deaths each year. BE CAREFUL!



### 1. Chloramphenicol (*Chloromycetin*) (p. 356)

The popular use of this medicine for simple diarrhea and other mild sicknesses is extremely unfortunate, because it is so risky. Use chloramphenicol only for very severe illnesses, like typhoid (see p. 188). Never give it to babies younger than 1 month old.



### 2. Oxytocin (*Pitocin*), ergometrine (*Ergotrate*), and misoprostol (*Cytotec*) (p. 392-393)

While these medicines are lifesaving drugs when used to stop heavy bleeding **after** birth (see p. 266), they are often misused **before** birth. Only use them to strengthen labor if you have been trained to do so and are in a medical center in case something goes wrong. They can cause the womb to burst, which could kill both the baby and the person giving birth.

### 3. Injections of any medicine



The belief that injections are usually better than medicine taken by mouth is not true. Many times medicines taken by mouth work as well as or better than injections. Also, most medicine is more dangerous injected than when taken by mouth. Use of injections should be very limited (read Chapter 9 carefully).

### 4. Penicillin (p. 350)

Penicillin works only against certain types of *infections*. As a general rule, injuries that do not break the skin, even if they make large bruises, have no danger of infection; they do not need to be treated with penicillin or any other antibiotic. Neither penicillin nor other antibiotics helps colds (see p. 163).

Penicillin can cause a dangerous reaction called allergic shock in some people. Before using it, know its risks and the precautions you must take—see pages 70 and 350.

### 5. Gentamicin (*Garamycin*) (p. 358)

Too much use of this antibiotic for babies has caused permanent hearing loss (deafness) in millions of babies. Give to babies only for life-threatening infections. For many infections of the newborn, ampicillin works as well and is much less dangerous.

**6. Anti-diarrhea medicines with hydroxyquinolines (Clioquinol, di-iodohydroxyquinoline, halquinol, broxyquinoline: Diodoquin, Enteroquinol, Amicline, Quogyl, and many other brand names)**

In the past **clioquinols** were widely used to treat diarrhea. These dangerous medicines are now prohibited in many countries—but in others are still sold. They can cause permanent paralysis, blindness, and even death. For treatment of diarrhea, see Chapter 13.

**7. Cortisone and corticosteroids (Prednisolone, dexamethasone, and others)**

These are powerful anti-inflammatory drugs that are needed for severe attacks of asthma, arthritis, or severe allergic reactions. But in many countries, steroids are prescribed for minor aches and pains because they often give quick results. This is a big mistake. Steroids cause serious or dangerous side effects—especially if used in high doses or for more than a few days. They lower a person's defenses against infection. They can make tuberculosis much worse, cause bleeding of stomach ulcers, and make bones so weak that they break easily.

**8. Anabolic steroids (Nandrolone decanoate, Durabolin, Deca-Durabolin, Orabolin; stanozolol, Cetabon; oxymetholone, Anapolon; ethylestrenol, Organaboral. There are many other brand names.)**

Anabolic steroids are made from male hormones and are mistakenly used in tonics to help children gain weight and grow. At first the child may grow faster, but he will stop growing sooner and end up shorter than he would have if he had not taken the medicine. Anabolic steroids cause very dangerous side effects. Girls grow hair on their faces like boys, which does not go away, even when the child stops taking the medicine. **Do not give growth tonics to children.** Instead, to help your child grow, use the money to buy food.

**9. Arthritis medicines (Butazones: oxyphenbutazone, Amidozone; and phenylbutazone, Butazolidin)**

These medicines for joint pain (arthritis) can cause a dangerous, sometimes deadly, blood disease (agranulocytosis). They can also damage the stomach, liver, and kidneys. **Do not use these dangerous medicines.** For arthritis, aspirin (p. 380) or ibuprofen (p. 380) is much safer and cheaper. For pain and fever only, acetaminophen (p. 380) can be used.

**10. Vitamin B<sub>12</sub>, liver extract, and iron injections (p. 394)**



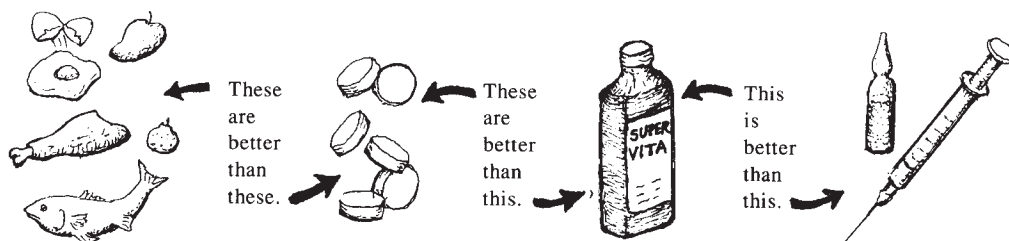
Vitamin B<sub>12</sub> and liver extract do not help anemia or weakness except in rare cases. Also, they have certain risks when injected. They should only be used when a specialist has prescribed them **after testing the blood**. Also, avoid injectable iron, such as *Imferon*. To combat anemia, iron pills are safer and work as well (see p. 124).

## 11. Other vitamins (p. 393)

Avoid buying vitamins or nutrition supplements unless you need them to treat a specific condition such as anemia (see p. 124) or you are pregnant (see p. 248). Syrups and tonics with vitamins, sometimes sold without the most important vitamins, are especially a waste of money (see p. 118). It is better to buy more and better food. Body-building and protective foods like beans, eggs, meat, fruit, vegetables, and whole grains are rich in vitamins and other nutrients (see p. 111). People can usually get enough vitamins and minerals by eating a variety of nutritious foods and this costs less.

**A person who eats well does not need extra vitamins.**

THE BEST WAY TO GET VITAMINS:



For more information about vitamins, when they are necessary, and the foods that have them, read Chapter 11, especially pages 111 and 118.

## 12. Combination medicines

Medicines for some illnesses, such as HIV and malaria, come as combination pills because they must be taken together and are easier to take this way (see p. 399).

But much of the time combination medicines contain medicines you do not need. Using them can be a waste of money and may cause harm. If you need both medicines, ask a pharmacist or health worker if it would cost less to buy them separately.

Some common combination medicines that should be **avoided** are:

- **cough medicines** which contain medicines both to suppress a cough and also to get rid of mucus. (Cough medicines are almost always useless and a waste of money, whether or not they combine medicines.)
- **antibiotics** combined with **anti-diarrhea medicine**
- **antacids** to treat stomach ulcers together with medicine to prevent stomach cramps
- 2 or more **pain medicines** (aspirin with acetaminophen—sometimes also with caffeine)

### 13. Calcium

Injecting calcium into a vein can be extremely dangerous. It can quickly kill someone if not injected **very slowly**. Injecting calcium into the buttocks sometimes causes very serious abscesses or infections.



**Never inject calcium without first seeking medical advice!**

**Note:** In Mexico and other countries where people eat a lot of corn tortillas or other foods prepared with lime (“cal”, not the fruit), it is foolish to use calcium injections or tonics (as is often done to “give strength” or “help children grow”). The body gets all the calcium it needs from the lime.

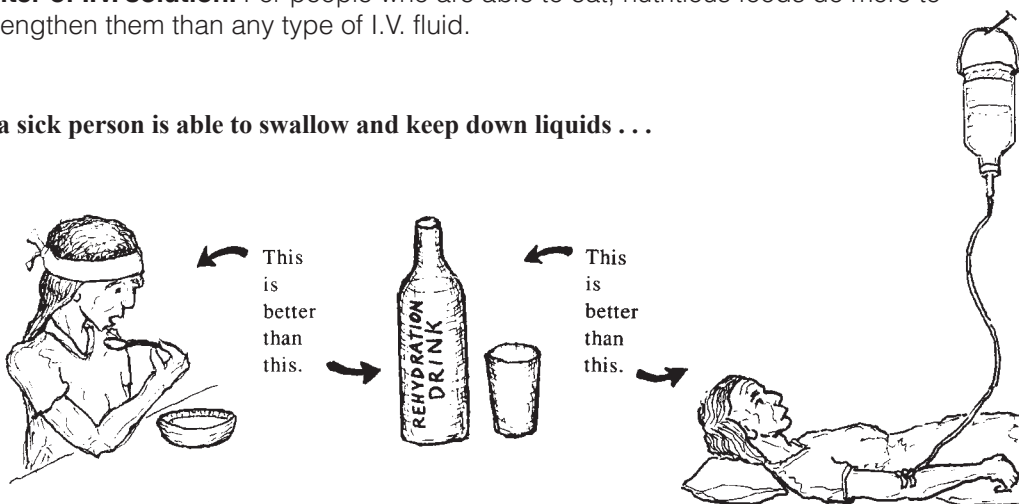
### 14. “Feeding” through the veins

In some areas, persons who are anemic or very weak spend their last penny to have a liter of solution put into their veins (intravenous or “I.V.”). They believe that this will make them stronger or their blood richer. But these liquids are nothing more than water with some salt or sugar in it. They give less energy than a large candy bar and make the blood thinner, not richer. They do not help anemia or make the weak person stronger. Intravenous (I.V.) solutions are needed only when a person has severe dehydration and cannot swallow or keep down liquids.

Only someone who is well trained should give I.V. solutions. Otherwise, there is danger of an infection entering the blood. This can kill the sick person.

**If the sick person can swallow, give her a liter of water with sugar (or cereal) and salt (see Rehydration Drink, p. 152). It will do more for her than injecting a liter of I.V. solution.** For people who are able to eat, nutritious foods do more to strengthen them than any type of I.V. fluid.

**If a sick person is able to swallow and keep down liquids . . .**



## WHEN SHOULD MEDICINE NOT BE TAKEN?

Many people have beliefs about things they should not do or eat when taking medicines. For this reason they may stop taking a medicine they need. In truth, no medicine causes harm just because it is taken with certain foods—whether pork, chili pepper, guava, oranges, or any other food. But foods with lots of grease or spices can make problems of the stomach or gut worse—whether or not any medicine is being taken (see p. 128). Certain medicines will cause bad reactions if a person drinks alcohol (see metronidazole, p. 370).

There are situations when special care should be taken when using medicines:

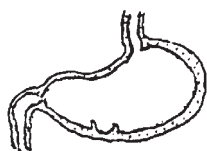


1. Always check before taking medicines during pregnancy and breastfeeding because many can cause harm to the baby. But some medicines, such as those for treating HIV, are especially important in pregnancy to protect the health of mother and baby (see p. 400). Also take vitamin pills during pregnancy because this is when the body needs extra vitamins and minerals like iron and folic acid.



2. With newborn children, be very careful when using medicines. Whenever possible look for medical help before giving them any type of medicine. Be sure not to give too much.

3. A person who has ever had any sort of allergic reaction—*hives*, itching, etc.—after taking penicillin, ampicillin, a sulfonamide, or another medicine **should stop taking it and never take it again**, even if the reaction was mild (see Dangerous reactions from injections of certain medicines, p. 70).



4. Persons who have stomach ulcers or heartburn should avoid medicines that contain aspirin or ibuprofen. Most painkillers and all steroids (see p. 51) make ulcers and acid indigestion worse. One painkiller that does not irritate the stomach is acetaminophen (paracetamol, see p. 380).

5. There are some medicines that are harmful or dangerous to take when you have a specific illness. For example, persons with long-term liver disease like hepatitis should not be treated with certain medicines, including some antibiotics, because when the liver is not working well, the medicine may build up and poison the body (see p. 172).

6. Persons who are dehydrated or have long-term kidney disease must be careful when taking certain medicines, because their kidneys are less able to remove medicines from the body, which can cause them to build up. For some medicines, including aspirin, some anti-seizure drugs, and certain antibiotics, this can poison the body. Do not give more than one dose of a medicine that could poison the body unless the person is urinating normally.