



December 17, 2020

Contact: Danny Chun: 630-276-5558

dchun@team-iha.org

Avoid Toxic Drug Combinations This Flu Season

Illinois Poison Center Warns of Dangerous Reactions

That cough or snuffle could morph into something much worse—if you're not careful with how you take over-the-counter (OTC) cold and flu medications. Experts at the Illinois Poison Center are alerting the public to dangerous drug combinations that could interact poorly with HIV medication, or cause a rapid increase in blood pressure.

Every winter is cold and flu season—but now COVID-19 complicates matters. COVID-19 and flu have certain symptoms in common, including:

- Fever or feeling feverish/chills
- Cough
- Shortness of breath or difficulty breathing
- Fatigue (tiredness)
- Sore throat
- Runny or stuffy nose
- Muscle pain or body aches
- Headache
- Vomiting and diarrhea

When reaching for OTC medication, Illinoisans can stay safe and alleviate the burden on healthcare providers during the pandemic by avoiding three potentially toxic drug combinations:

1. **Dextromethorphan and psychiatric medication**—Dextromethorphan is a cough suppressant present in most over-the-counter cough syrups. If taken with certain psychiatric drugs, like lithium or SSRIs (selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors), it could cause a dangerous spike in serotonin levels to the brain. Possible symptoms include headaches, confusion, nausea, sweating and rapid heart rate.
2. **Decongestants and antidepressants**—Pseudoephedrine and phenylephrine are common ingredients in decongestants. They should not be taken with monoamine

oxidase inhibitors (MAOI) such as Elderpryl, Nardil and Parnate. Combining MAOIs and pseudoephedrine/phenylephrine can lead to a potentially fatal rapid increase in blood pressure. In fact, people should be off MAOIs at least 14 days before taking these common medications—and consult their physician if they have high blood pressure.

3. **Zinc and antiretroviral HIV medications**—Zinc, a popular supplement, can limit the efficacy of HIV medications such as integrase strand transfer inhibitors (INSTIs). To prevent interference with HIV treatment, it's recommended to take the antiretroviral medications two hours before taking zinc or six hours after taking the zinc.

“Many people don’t realize the medications in their medicine cabinet could be incredibly dangerous if taken the wrong way,” says IPC Assistant Vice President Carol DesLauriers, PharmD. “I can’t stress enough how important it is to carefully read instructions and consult a medical professional if you’re unsure.”

“During the pandemic, it’s more critical that we reduce stress on our healthcare providers,” says IPC Medical Director Michael Wahl, MD. “By avoiding hazardous drug combinations, we can keep patients safe at home and prevent unnecessary trips to the emergency room.”

If you or someone around you is exposed to any of the medication combinations described above, call the IPC helpline at 1-800-222-1222. IPC experts are available to provide information and treatment advice 24 hours per day, 365 days per year, including holidays. The call is free and confidential.

See an [IPC blog post](#) for more information on these toxic drug combinations.

###

The Illinois Poison Center is a nonprofit health service that provides the people of Illinois with comprehensive and trusted information and treatment advice on potentially harmful substances via a free, confidential 24-hour helpline staffed by specially trained physicians, nurses and pharmacists.