Stock Your Medicine Cabinet Like a Pediatrician

It’s always helpful—now more than ever—to have the essentials on hand for inevitable injuries and illnesses. We asked dozens of doctor moms and dads which drugstore items they keep at the ready.

by EMILY ELVERU / photographs by TED + CHELSEA CAVANAUGH

Pain Relievers

The two main players for OTC relief are acetaminophen and ibuprofen—better known to most of us by brand names like Tylenol and Advil. Depending on your child’s age or ailment or the med’s side effects, you might opt for one or both. Kids’ versions of acetaminophen can be taken starting at 2 months; ibuprofen at 6 months. Each can be given every six hours, and for extended relief, you can alternate the two every three hours. How much your kid takes is based on weight, not age, so ask your doctor for specifics if you need them.

ACETAMINOPHEN You can use this for kid headaches, sprains, fractures, and fever. But treat discomfort, not a number on the thermometer; if your kid has a fever but is happy and playing, there’s no need to medicate, says Christopher Etscheidt, M.D., a pediatrician in Waukee, Iowa.

IBUPROFEN This can also reduce pain and fever, but its anti-inflammatory properties make it more effective for strains or sprains. While the World Health Organization previously recommended avoiding ibuprofen to treat COVID-19 symptoms, it now says there is no evidence it’ll make them worse when taken by kids and adults.

Skin & Wound Care

Many of these skin-care basics can tackle multiple jobs.

PETROLEUM JELLY Reach for this go-to to help heal dry skin, eczema, and diaper rash.

LOTION Stick with one that’s dye-free, water-based, and unscented (Aveeno, Eucerin, Dove, and Cetaphil all have options). “I also love Aquaphor because it seals in moisture and is versatile,” says Tamar Nazerian Chorbadjian, D.O., a pediatrician in Los Angeles. “Use it on eczema, dry lips, and diaper rash.”
**WHAT'S THE PARENTS AAP PANEL?**

We've partnered with the American Academy of Pediatrics to create a special group of pediatrician moms and dads who weigh in on health issues and offer wise advice.

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**HYDROCORTISONE 1%**

This mild steroid cream can dial down irritation from rashes, eczema, and bug bites—just avoid open wounds. You can also layer petroleum jelly or lotion on top, says Hillary Zieve, M.D., a pediatrician at CHOC Children’s Hospital, in Orange, California. And limit use on sensitive areas (face, diaper region) to less than a week. If a rash doesn’t clear up, call your pediatrician.

**ANTIBIOTIC OINTMENT**

Ward off infection in minor cuts, burns, and scratches or use if skin is red, swollen, or tender. Docs recommend bacitracin or Neosporin (which has three antibiotic ingredients).

**DIAPER-RASH CREAM**

“Mix a ‘clear’ cream like A&D or Vaseline, which contains petrolatum, with a ‘white’ cream like Desitin, which has zinc oxide,” says Dr. Etscheidt. “This protects the skin and creates a barrier as it heals.”

**SUNSCREEN**

“Look for a zinc-oxide formula with an SPF of at least 30 and 80-minute water- and sweat-resistant protection,” says Rachel Coel, M.D., Ph.D., a pediatrician and sports-medicine specialist at Kapi’olani Medical Center for Women & Children, in Honolulu. “Reapply often, even on overcast days or when kids are playing in the snow or rain.”

**Allergy Relief**

**ANTIHISTAMINE**

Runny and itchy nose, irritated eyes or skin, sneezing—all telltale signs of allergies. Try a long-lasting, nondrowsy medication like Children’s Allegra, says Natasha Burgert, M.D., a pediatrician at Pediatric Associates, in Overland Park, Kansas. “If you see no relief after three days or symptoms get worse, call your doctor.”

**SALINE NASAL SPRAY**

Try this for blocked, stuffy, itchy, or dry noses. First, blow out or suction boogies. Then insert the nozzle, pointing it away from the center of the nose and toward the ear; spray once or twice in each nostril (yes, your kid will hate it). Gently dry the nose. If needed, you can do this up to six times a day, says Candice W. Jones, M.D., a pediatrician at Edgewater Pediatrics, in Orlando.
Keep meds off-limits. Store all prescriptions, OTC and liquid medicines, and even vitamins up and out of reach of your kids. Even better, put them in a medication lockbox (you can find one on Amazon or at drugstores). “When I’m taking or putting away pills, I explain to my 3-year-old what they’re for, who can use them, and why she should leave them alone,” says Dr. Tamar Nazerian Chorbadjian.

Stash first-aid products within reach. Place bandages and antiseptic cream in a separate location away from medications, such as in a drawer, so your older child can practice self-care for simple cuts and burns, suggests Dr. Natasha Burgert.

Group like with like. “I place drugs that serve similar purposes together,” says Dr. Rachel Coel. “For example, drugs that treat fever, pain, and headaches—ibuprofen, acetaminophen, and naproxen—all go in the same bin, out of reach of my kids. Periodically, I check expiration dates. If they’re past due, I throw them out and purchase new ones.” Similarly, Dr. Chorbadjian divides her medicine cabinet by person. Label the bins so you can grab the right one when you’re in a pinch.

Create a “sick kit.” Stock it with children’s and adults’ pain reliever, cough suppressants, immune support (such as vitamin C, zinc), nasal saline, Pedialyte or Gatorade, upset-stomach relief (like ginger tea), a thermometer, gloves, masks, trash bags, hand sanitizer, Lysol spray, Clorox wipes, paper towels—and maybe even some canned chicken noodle soup.

Cold Care

Cough Syrup

OTC cough and cold meds should not be given to kids under 4 years. For ages 4 to 6, only give if your doctor advises. Follow the dosing directions on the package carefully. Look for a syrup with dextromethorphan and guaifenesin, suggests Amanda Webb, M.D., a pediatrician at St. Luke’s Pediatric Associates, in Duluth, Minnesota.

Menthol Rub “If my toddler has a cold, he says, ‘Put Vicks on, please!’” says Anita Raghavan, M.D., a pediatric hospitalist at Akron Children’s Hospital, in Ohio. Smooth ¼ teaspoon onto your kid’s chest and back pre-bed to open that nose.

Honey This can double as cough syrup, says Doug Lincoln, M.D., a pediatrician at Metropolitan Pediatrics, in Portland, Oregon. But honey is only for kids over age 1. “I give 2 teaspoons a day when my son has a cough,” says Silvia Pereira-Smith, M.D., a developmental pediatrician in Charleston, South Carolina. “Most colds just need honey, steam, cuddles, and a snot sucker,” Dr. Lincoln says.

Supplements

Vitamins For kids not quite eating a balanced diet, multivitamins can help. Dr. Jones likes SmartyPants Kids Formula Daily Gummy Multivitamin.

Baby Care

Gas Drops “They contain simethicone, which can break up gas bubbles and ease belly pain,” Dr. Webb says.

Gripe Water This blend of peppermint, chamomile, or fennel can help relieve colic. Avoid varieties from abroad, which may contain alcohol.

Nasal Aspirator Babies don’t know to open their mouth when their nose is clogged, so this opens the airways. “I used NoseFrida until my son learned to blow his nose at age 2,” says Dr. Raghavan.

Tools & Supplies

Thermometer Doctors say go with a rectal one up to age 3 and the oral or forehead kind for older kids.

Bandages Stock a range of sizes—from small round ones to the large rectangular kind for skinned knees. And involve kids in washing and bandaging: “It calms them during a stressful situation,” Dr. Burgert says.

Gauze and Medical Tape If a wound is too big for a bandage, cut gauze to size and secure it with medical tape. Tape can even stabilize a broken toe: Gently wrap the little piggy to the one next to it, says Victoria Chen, M.D., a developmental-behavioral pediatrician at Cohen Children’s Medical Center, in New Hyde Park, New York.

Tweezers A must-have for splinter and tick removal.

Masks “Prepandemic, we wore them if anyone at home had flu-like symptoms,” says Dr. Raghavan. “Now we wear cloth ones, even my toddler, to protect ourselves and others when we’re out.”