

The Well-stocked Medicine Cabinet

By Marc Spero, MD

This article identifies items that you should have available at home, to deal with medical issues as they arise, and to help assess their urgency and seriousness. You may already have many of the items listed.

Diagnostic Equipment:

A Thermometer: I am always surprised at how many people do not own a working thermometer and cannot, therefore, tell me their temperature other than “I feel feverish” or “I have chills”. There is a huge difference between, say, a cough, urinary symptoms or abdominal pain with a normal temperature and identical symptoms with fever. Even people with small children, who would never think to call their pediatrician without taking a child's temperature, will routinely neglect to do so for themselves.

I prefer oral digital thermometers, although ear thermometers are okay as well. I have less confidence in surface temperature devices.

Blood Pressure Device: For patients with high blood pressure, particularly those who are taking medication for it, a blood pressure device is very useful. I would suggest an upper arm device as opposed to wrist or finger devices, which can be less accurate. It can be a totally manual or have features such as digital readout, cumulative readout, trend analysis, etc. but it is invaluable information if you should call and say that you are dizzy. This might represent low blood pressure requiring only an adjustment in medication, or may be more serious.

Glucometer: For those with diabetes, it is highly recommended that you keep a working glucometer, so that we can assess your glucose control, and specifically ascertain whether another illness, say the flu, is dangerously affecting your blood sugar.

Wound Care:

An **antiseptic** is useful for cleaning up wounds- cuts and scratches and scrapes. I prefer hydrogen peroxide, though simple soap and water will do. **Antiseptic ointment** such as Bacitracin or Neosporin, (generics are fine), can be applied to wounds that have been contaminated or appear to be becoming infected. Ointment is gooey, so it's ideally applied under a bandage. If the wound will be left open, the water-based cream is preferred.

Sterile gauze can be used to clean and dress wounds. 4x4 is a good all-purpose size, and is available at any pharmacy. It usually comes as individually wrapped sheets, which can be used one at a time, preserving the sterility of the remaining sheets. Paper tape is a gentler on the skin, is hypoallergenic, and easier to pull off. The 1 inch width is most useful.

Marc Spero, MD
110 E. 55th St
New York, NY
212.355.8315
Marcsperomd.com

A box of assorted “**band-aid**” **type elastic bandages** can be used to keep cuts and scrapes clean and keep blood from leaking onto clothes and furniture. Children find they have a magical power to heal.

An **Ace bandage** is good to have around for sprains. This should be applied after the sprained area has been cooled with an ice pack. An ankle size bandage makes a pretty good all purpose device as it can be used for wrists and, in a pinch, knees as well.

A thermal pack, available in any pharmacy, can be kept in the freezer. (Many of these packs can be used as well for heat treatments when they are microwaved.) Cold packs assist in minimizing swelling by reducing circulation to injured areas. They work best when applied immediately after the injury, before swelling has begun. Ordinary freezer ice placed in a sealable plastic bag also works fine.

Medications:

Acetaminophen, (Tylenol or any generic), is a mainstay in this category, to be taken for pain and fever control. For most purposes, acetaminophen is better than the nonsteroidal anti-inflammatories (NSAID), such as ibuprofen (Advil or Motrin) or naproxen (Aleve), as it does not irritate the stomach lining or alter clotting. It can be used for anything from ordinary headaches, fever, sprains, or muscle ache after unaccustomed exercise or activity. It should be avoided by those with liver disease.

Milk of Magnesia (MOM), liquid or tablets, is ideal for occasional constipation. 1 to 2 tablespoons at bedtime generally produces a movement in the morning. The flavored name brands generally taste better. Stimulant laxatives, either by mouth or suppository, can cause significant cramping and will tend to cause dependency if used too frequently, so I usually avoid them.

Immodium is ideal for occasional diarrhea. This should be taken as prescribed, 2 tablets at the onset of diarrhea and then one every 4 hours as needed. Watch out for blood in the stool or for fever. If these occur we need to talk. Viral diarrhea should be gone after 24-48 hours.

Aspirin, a single full strength (325 mg) tablet can be a lifesaver early in the course of a heart attack or stroke. In a pinch you can chew 4 baby aspirins or 4 of the 81 mg heart prevention aspirins all at once.

Antihistamine, such as Benadryl (generic diphenhydramine), Claritin, (loratadine generic), Zyrtec, (cetirizine), or Allegra (fexofenadine) are useful for seasonal allergic reactions and for itching. Do not purchase the “D” versions of these medications, as they contain a decongestant that is rarely needed and often cause side effects. Benadryl has the advantage that it can be used as a mild sedative as well.

An **antibiotic** in the cabinet is needed by some individuals under special circumstances, such as obstructive lung disease, frequent urinary infections or altered immunity due to cancer chemotherapy or HIV. This is something we should discuss at your next appointment if it applies to you.

I do not suggest over-the-counter cold and cough preparations. Generally speaking they are a "kitchen sink" type mix of three or four substances, when one or possibly two would do. They are often

Marc Spero, MD
110 E. 55th St
New York, NY
212.355.8315
Marcsperomd.com

associated with sedation, agitation, and mental fuzziness. For those with hypertension, prostate enlargement, or glaucoma they can cause serious adverse reactions.

Here is a better idea : for fever and achiness take Tylenol; for a cough, use simple mentholated cough-drops or steam; for stuffy nose, use Breathe Right strips or, if you're uncomfortably stuffy at night, try some over-the-counter Vicks under (not in) the nose. Drink warm liquids, such as tea or soup, and at bedtime.

These items constitute a well-stocked medicine cabinet. If you keep this basic kit complete and up-to-date you will be prepared for the vast majority of minor medical problems and you will be in a position to give me a timely "heads up" in the event of problems which may be more serious... or not.

Marc Spero, MD
110 E. 55th St
New York, NY
212.355.8315
Marcsperomd.com