



# Common Cold? O My—How Do I Choose Among All The “Cold” Drugs on Store Shelves

By Dwaine Rieves

**C**ough, nasal stuffiness and congestion, mild fever, a few muscle aches—the symptoms of a common cold are all too familiar to most folks once they enter their senior years. And if those symptoms aren’t bothersome enough, many of us seniors will browse the store shelves of “cough and cold” or “cold & flu” medicines in search of a simple and safe drug to help us feel better. And because we know there is no “cure all” for the common cold (if only), we generally will think of our most bothersome symptom or two. And hopefully we can find a drug on the shelves that can safely treat those specific symptoms.

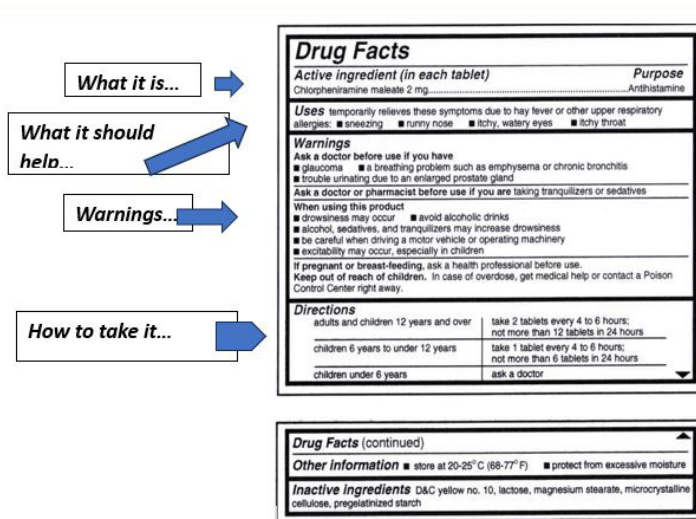
Cough? Nose or sinus congestion? Achiness? The other day I went searching for a drug to help my cough, which is typical for when I catch a cold. But when I started browsing the “cold & flu” shelves at the CVS on Dupont Circle, I felt like I gazing down the Las Vegas strip because there so many choices and so many that seemed to shout their usefulness in treating the “COLD,” or “COLD and COUGH,” or “MULTI-SYMPTOM COLD.” Red and blue bottles, happy faces and green cartoon noses, day and night versions—the choices were overwhelming.

After orienting myself to all these drug options, I found a few that were targeted to “COUGH.” As I stood before the “COUGH” syrups, I got to thinking about my nasal stuffiness, and then I remembered I did ache a little also. So maybe one of those “MULTI-SYMPTOM COLD” medicines would treat my nighttime cough as well as a few other symptoms. Ugh—how to choose?

I walked further down the aisle and saw that some “COLD” medications also had big letters on the label saying they were for “SEVERE SYMPTOMS” or “INTENSE FLU” or “COLD RELIEF.” Several labels also claimed, “MAXIMUM STRENGTH” some saying in big letters “EXTENDED RELEASE,” and others “SAFE FOR USE WITH HIGH BLOOD PRESSURE,” and others “SAFE WITH DIABETES.”

In short, scanning the front labels of all these drugs was mystifying, the spectacle giving me the sense that each and any one of these drugs was sort of a gamble. Why wasn’t there some standardization on all these labeling claims for over-the-counter (OTC) cold medicines?

At this point, I chuckled to myself because I realized my cold had clouded my thinking. Too, I was in a hurry. So, between my impatience and unease, I’d overlooked the obvious. Of course, Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has required standardized labels on these drugs. Indeed, decades back I’d worked as an FDA regulator of drug labeling. Dwaine, didn’t you remember? The FDA does require “factual” labeling on these OTC drugs, but the facts do not have to be on the front of the box or bottle. The front is for making a sale. The front is where the happy face and Las Vegas-neon branding logos typically go.



I then lifted a box of the “MAXIMUM STRENGTH” from the shelf and looked at the back of the box. There it was—“DRUG FACTS” in the format required by FDA. FDA has required all OTC cold drugs to include a “DRUG FACTS” section on their labels. It’s the most important facts about the drug, including:

- name of the chemical in the drug (the “active ingredient”)
- purpose (“use”) of the drug
- directions on how to use the drug (dose and how to take the dose)
- warnings and other important safety information.

The main types of cold drugs are:

- Nasal decongestants - unclog a stuffy nose
- Cough suppressants - quiet a cough
- Expectorants - loosen mucus in your lungs so you can cough it up
- Antihistamines - stop runny noses and sneezing
- Pain relievers - ease fever, headaches, and minor aches and pains.

These are important to know so that you don’t accidentally double up on the same drug.

Below, I include an example of the “DRUG FACTS” the FDA provides to the public and drug companies. But did you know that FDA allows the “DRUG FACTS” to be printed in a font that is known to be too small for many seniors to read?

Yes, when FDA set up the requirement for labeling, the Agency noted that the required font size (6 point) was too small for most seniors to read. They made this decision to allow companies to fit the information on small containers. So, what do you do if you can’t read the “DRUG FACTS”? FDA says to “ask your pharmacist.” Of course, we can adjust our glasses, try a magnifying glass, or look up the

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label on the internet. But if there’s any doubt about the information (and no young person around to read the “DRUG FACTS” aloud), ask the pharmacist.

At the Dupont CVS pharmacy the other day, I counted myself lucky for still being able to read the “DRUG FACTS” on the blue-colored bottle of cough syrup that hopefully would help my cough tonight. I’m glad I read it because it also contained acetaminophen (Tylenol), and the label warned me that too much Tylenol can damage the liver. I was very aware of the risks associated with high-dose Tylenol, but the label served as a reminder. Of course, the

words were so small they gave the sense of a secret, which in a strange way made the information seem even more important. It’s the kind of importance that, in a world of Las Vegas-style drug advertisements, I suspect every suspicious senior can truly appreciate—unless they have a common cold and are in a hurry. Then it takes patience, which is perhaps the best treatment anyone could ask for when it comes to the common cold.

On page 7 is an example of the “DRUG FACTS” label required on all over-the-counter medications, which I have excerpted from the FDA website. And one last point—sometimes the “Drug Facts” are only on the box (e.g., the box that contains a bottle) and not on the bottle itself. So, it’s wise to keep the “Drug Facts” part of the box label before you toss the hype out and start with the gamble.