HEALTH BASICS

Pill identifier

A pill identifier uses a tablet or capsule's markings and appearance to help identify it.

WHAT IT IS
A way to identify tablets and capsules

WHERE IT COMES UP
Unknown, loose, mixed, or newly changed medicines

WHY IT MATTERS
Helps prevent medication mistakes and accidental poisoning

WHAT IT IS NOT
Proof that a pill is genuine

WHO TO ASK
A pharmacist or poison control service

HOW IT IS CHECKED
Imprint, shape, color, packaging, and trusted drug records

Overview

A pill identifier is a tool or process used to work out what a tablet or capsule may be. It is not a disease, diagnosis, or medical test.

Identification usually begins with the pill's imprint . This is the combination of letters, numbers, or symbols printed, stamped, or engraved on it. Shape, color, size, score lines, and whether it is a tablet or capsule provide supporting information.

In the United States, most prescription and over-the-counter solid medicines must carry an imprint unless they qualify for an exemption. The imprint is meant to help distinguish one drug product from another. Requirements and identification systems differ between countries.

A pill identifier can narrow down the possibilities, but appearance alone cannot confirm what a pill contains. Counterfeit products may copy legitimate markings. Supplements, medicines from another country, and some exempt products may have no useful imprint.

If you find an unknown pill, do not take it to see what it does. A pharmacist can often help identify it. If someone may already have swallowed it, contact a poison control service rather than waiting for symptoms.

How it works

A pill identifier compares visible details with information from medicine labels or drug databases. The most useful detail is usually the complete imprint from both sides.

For example, a code such as "AB 12" is more useful than "white round tablet." Many unrelated medicines share the same color and shape. The spaces, punctuation, logo, and order of characters can also matter.

An identification check may use:

All details should match the same product record. A result is less reliable if the imprint is incomplete, the pill is broken, or several possible products appear.

A pharmacy may dispense the same medicine from a different manufacturer. Its color or shape may then look different even though the active ingredient and prescribed strength are unchanged. The pharmacy label may list the manufacturer, and the pharmacist can check the product supplied.

A score line is not an identifier by itself. It also does not automatically mean that a tablet is safe to split. Some tablets release medicine slowly or have coatings that should remain intact. Check the label or ask a pharmacist before dividing one.

- The full imprint from both sides
- Tablet or capsule shape and color
- Score lines or other surface features
- Approximate size
- The original container, blister pack, or pharmacy label
- The country where the pill was supplied
- Manufacturer information

Why it matters for your health

Correct identification helps prevent medication errors , meaning mistakes involving the wrong drug, strength, person, or schedule. This is especially important when pills have been removed from their labelled containers or several medicines look similar.

Identification can also help when a refill looks different. A change may be expected because the pharmacy used another manufacturer. It may also reflect a dispensing mistake. Checking before taking the pill can clarify which situation applies.

An identifier may provide useful information during an accidental ingestion. Poison control

staff will also need details about the person, the possible amount, when it happened, and any symptoms. They may ask you to read the imprint or send a clear photograph.

Pill identification has limits. A matching database result does not prove that the pill is genuine, uncontaminated, or the labelled strength. It cannot show whether heat, moisture, age, or poor storage has damaged the medicine.

There is no reliable home test that confirms a pill's chemical contents. When authenticity is in doubt, the safest approach is not to use the pill and to ask a pharmacist or the relevant medicine regulator for guidance.

What can go wrong

Medication mix-ups can happen when several pills are stored in one unlabelled container. A correct identification may be difficult if products have similar markings or if part of a tablet has broken away.

Accidental poisoning may occur when a child, adult, or visitor swallows an unknown medicine. Even without symptoms, prompt advice is important because some effects can be delayed. The appropriate response is based on the possible substance, amount, timing, and person involved.

Counterfeit or falsified medicines may contain the wrong ingredient, too much or too little medicine, or no active medicine. A counterfeit pill can closely copy the color, shape, and imprint of a genuine product. Online photographs or an identifier cannot rule this out.

Damaged or altered pills may be hard to identify. Moisture can blur printing, while breaking or crushing can remove part of an imprint. Discoloration, crumbling, swelling, or an unusual smell may indicate poor storage or damage. Identification does not establish that such a pill remains safe to use.

Products without standard imprints include some supplements, compounded medicines, exempt drug products, and products obtained outside the United States. A pill with no marking is not automatically unsafe, but it usually cannot be identified reliably by appearance alone.

What you can do

Keep medicines in their original labelled containers whenever possible. If you use a pill organizer, fill it from one labelled container at a time and keep the pharmacy containers available for reference.

For a pill you do not recognize, record the imprint exactly as it appears. Check both sides and note the color, shape, score lines, and packaging. A clear photograph beside a ruler may help a pharmacist assess its size, but a photograph is not proof of identity.

Use a trusted database based on official medicine labels. Match every visible feature, not only the color or one part of the imprint. If several results remain possible, do not guess.

Ask a pharmacist when:

If a medicine looks different, check before the next dose when possible. Do not make a long-term change to an important prescribed medicine based only on appearance. A pharmacist can give timely advice about the product and what to do if a dose is due.

If nobody has swallowed the unknown pill, keep it away from children and pets. Use an authorized medicine take-back option when available. Follow local disposal instructions; flushing is recommended only for certain medicines when no suitable take-back option is readily available.

If someone may have swallowed an unknown pill, contact poison control promptly. In the United States, call Poison Help at 1-800-222-1222 . Outside the United States, use your local poison information service. Do not induce vomiting unless a poison specialist tells you to do so.

Call emergency services immediately if the person collapses, has a seizure, has trouble breathing, or cannot be awakened.

- A refill looks different from your previous supply
- A pill does not match the pharmacy label's description
- The imprint is unclear or produces several matches
- You need to know whether a scored tablet can be split
- You suspect storage damage or a dispensing error

Common questions

Can I identify a pill by color and shape alone?

Usually not with confidence. Many products look alike, and appearance can change between manufacturers. The complete imprint and original packaging are more useful.

What if the pill has no imprint?

Do not assume what it is. It may be a supplement, a foreign product, an exempt medicine, a compounded product, or a counterfeit. A pharmacist may review the packaging, but appearance alone may not provide an answer.

Can an online pill identifier confirm that a medicine is safe?

No. It can suggest a labelled product that matches the visible features. It cannot confirm the contents, strength, storage history, or authenticity of the pill in your hand.

Why does my regular medicine suddenly look different?

The pharmacy may have changed manufacturers. Check the pharmacy label and ask the pharmacist to confirm the product before taking it if the change was unexpected.

Can I use a photograph-search app?

It may offer possible matches, but image recognition can misread color, size, or markings. Confirm any result against an official label record or with a pharmacist.

Can a laboratory test an unknown pill?

Specialized chemical testing exists, but it is not a routine home identification method. For ordinary medication questions, the original packaging, official records, and a pharmacist are the practical starting points.

Sources

- Electronic Code of Federal Regulations, Title 21, Part 206 - Imprinting of Solid Oral Dosage Form Drug Products for Human Use
- U.S. Food and Drug Administration - Drug Identification
- U.S. Food and Drug Administration - Counterfeit Medicine
- U.S. Food and Drug Administration - Disposal of Unused Medicines: What You Should Know
- National Library of Medicine - About DailyMed
- Health Resources and Services Administration - Poison Help