CONDITION

Contac overdose

A Contac overdose is poisoning caused by taking too much of one or more medicines in a Contac cold-and-flu product.

WHAT IT IS
Poisoning from excess multi-ingredient cold medicine

BODY SYSTEM
Nervous system, heart and circulation, liver, and breathing

MAIN SYMPTOMS
Drowsiness, agitation, nausea, fast heartbeat

WHAT CAUSES IT
Too much of one or more active ingredients

HOW IT IS DIAGNOSED
Exposure history, blood tests, and heart tracing

MAIN TREATMENT
Monitoring, supportive care, and ingredient-specific antidotes

CAN IT BE CURED?
Sometimes - early treatment can prevent lasting injury

IS IT AN EMERGENCY?
Yes - after excess or uncertain amounts

LONG-TERM OUTLOOK
Full recovery common; severe poisoning may cause lasting injury

Overview

A Contac overdose happens when someone takes more than the recommended amount of a Contac cold-and-flu medicine. It can occur all at once or through repeated doses over several hours or days.

Contac is a brand name, not one specific medicine. Products and ingredients have changed over time and may differ between countries. Depending on the package, a product may contain acetaminophen, an antihistamine, a decongestant, a cough suppressant, or a combination.

Each ingredient causes different effects. Too much acetaminophen can damage the liver, while decongestants can dangerously raise heart rate and blood pressure. Antihistamines and cough suppressants can affect alertness, behavior, body temperature, and breathing.

Some serious effects are delayed. A person with acetaminophen poisoning may initially feel well while liver injury develops. Do not wait for symptoms before seeking advice.

If an overdose may have happened, contact a poison center immediately. In the United States, call Poison Control at 1-800-222-1222 or use its online tool. Elsewhere, call your local poison information service. Call emergency services for severe symptoms or immediate danger.

Symptoms

Symptoms depend on the ingredients, amount, formulation, and whether other substances were involved.

Early symptoms may include:

Acetaminophen poisoning may cause few symptoms during the first day. Early nausea, sweating, vomiting, or abdominal discomfort may be followed over several days by pain under the right ribs, yellow skin or eyes, confusion, unusual bleeding, or worsening nausea. These can indicate liver injury.

Antihistamines such as chlorpheniramine can cause marked sleepiness. Larger amounts may instead cause agitation, hallucinations, very dry skin, difficulty urinating, a fast heartbeat, high body temperature, or seizures.

Decongestants such as phenylephrine or pseudoephedrine can cause anxiety, tremor, headache, high blood pressure, chest discomfort, or an abnormal heart rhythm. Severe poisoning can cause seizures or circulation problems.

Dextromethorphan may cause drowsiness, confusion, slurred speech, poor balance, agitation, or slowed breathing. Combined with medicines that increase serotonin, it can contribute to serotonin syndrome, which may cause agitation, sweating, muscle stiffness, fever, and a fast heartbeat.

- Nausea, vomiting, or stomach pain
- Sleepiness, dizziness, or poor coordination
- Restlessness, confusion, or unusual behavior
- Dry mouth, blurred vision, or enlarged pupils
- Sweating, shaking, or headache
- A fast or pounding heartbeat

Causes and risk factors

An overdose may be accidental or intentional. Common causes include taking another dose too soon, misreading the label, or using multiple cold, flu, pain, or sleep medicines containing the same ingredient.

Acetaminophen may appear on labels as "acetaminophen" or "APAP." Combining Contac with another acetaminophen-containing product can cause an overdose even if the products are being used for different symptoms.

Other risk factors include:

Children can become seriously ill from amounts that seem small to an adult. Older adults may be more sensitive to sedation, confusion, urinary problems, blood pressure changes, and abnormal heart rhythms.

- Using a household spoon instead of the supplied measuring device
- Confusing adult and children's products
- Taking a long-acting product more often than directed
- A child getting into an unsecured package
- Being unsure whether an earlier dose was taken
- Combining the product with alcohol, recreational drugs, or interacting medicines
- Repeated dosing during poor food intake, vomiting, or illness
- Deliberately taking a large amount during emotional distress

Diagnosis

There is no single test for every Contac overdose. Diagnosis begins by identifying the exact product and estimating how much was taken and when.

The package is important because products sold under the Contac name can contain different ingredients. If possible, keep the box, blister pack, bottle, or a clear photograph of the Drug Facts label.

Medical assessment may include checking alertness, breathing, temperature, blood pressure, heart rate, and pupil size. An electrocardiogram, or ECG, can detect rhythm changes caused by certain ingredients.

Blood tests may measure acetaminophen and check liver and kidney function, blood sugar, salts, and acid levels. Timing matters for an acetaminophen level. A test taken too early may

not show the full risk, so another may be needed, particularly when the time is uncertain or a long-acting product was taken.

Testing and treatment may start before every detail is known, especially after a large or uncertain amount or when acetaminophen may be involved.

Treatment and management

Treatment depends on the ingredients, amount, timing, symptoms, examination, and test results. Poison-center specialists or medical toxicologists may guide care.

Do not make yourself vomit. Do not use food, charcoal, milk, or another medicine as a home antidote unless a poison professional specifically instructs you to do so.

Activated charcoal may sometimes be given in an emergency department to reduce absorption. It is most useful within a limited time and is unsafe for some people, particularly anyone who is very drowsy or cannot protect their airway.

Acetaminophen poisoning is treated with N-acetylcysteine , or NAC. This antidote helps prevent or limit liver injury. It works best when started early but can still help later. Clinicians use the history, timing, blood level, and liver test results to decide whether it is needed.

Other treatment may include:

Severe liver failure may require care in a specialist liver center. In uncommon cases, liver transplantation is considered.

After an intentional overdose, care should also include a mental health assessment and a safe follow-up plan.

- Monitoring breathing, heart rhythm, temperature, and blood pressure
- Intravenous fluids
- Oxygen or breathing support
- Medicines for severe agitation, seizures, or dangerous blood pressure changes
- Cooling measures for a high body temperature
- Repeat blood tests and ECGs

Complications

Many people recover fully with prompt treatment. Complication risk rises with larger amounts, delayed care, long-acting products, or multiple substances.

Possible complications include:

Severe poisoning can be fatal, but early poison-center advice and treatment reduce the risk of lasting harm.

- Liver injury or liver failure
- Abnormal heart rhythms or severe blood pressure changes
- Seizures, delirium, or coma
- Overheating and muscle breakdown
- Breathing failure
- Aspiration of vomit into the lungs
- Kidney injury
- Injuries from falls or confused behavior

Prevention

Check the active ingredients every time you buy or use a Contac product because the brand covers different combinations.

Use only the measuring cup, syringe, or spoon supplied with liquid medicine. Follow the package interval, and keep a written record if several people are caring for a sick child or adult.

Do not take two products containing the same ingredient. Cold medicines, pain relievers, sleep aids, and prescription medicines may overlap. Ask a pharmacist to compare labels if you are unsure.

Keep medicines in their original child-resistant packages, locked away and out of sight. Child-resistant packaging is not childproof. Do not describe medicine as candy.

Use a pharmacy or community take-back program to discard expired or unwanted medicines when available. Keeping fewer unnecessary combination products at home can reduce mix-ups.

Living with it and what to expect

A Contac overdose is usually an acute event. Recovery depends mainly on the ingredients, amount, and how quickly treatment started.

After a mild exposure, drowsiness, restlessness, or a fast heartbeat may settle as the medicine

leaves the body. Observation may still be necessary because long-acting products release medicine over many hours.

Acetaminophen-related liver injury develops over days. When treatment starts early and tests remain reassuring, lasting damage is less likely. If liver tests become abnormal, monitoring may continue for days, with repeat tests after discharge. Recovery from significant liver injury can take weeks or longer.

Follow discharge instructions about activity, alcohol, and medicines. Do not restart a cold medicine or acetaminophen-containing product until the treating team says it is safe.

After an accidental overdose, review how the mistake happened to prevent another one. Poison services provide practical, nonjudgmental help.

Recovery after an intentional overdose may include ongoing mental health support. The long-term outlook depends on both physical recovery and support for the circumstances that led to the overdose.

When to get medical help

Contact a poison center immediately after any suspected Contac overdose, even if there are no symptoms. This includes taking more than directed, taking an uncertain amount, or combining products that may share an ingredient.

Call emergency services now if the person:

Do not drive yourself if you are drowsy, confused, faint, or very agitated. Bring the package and any other medicines that may have been taken.

After discharge, complete recommended follow-up for repeat liver tests, persistent symptoms, medication review, or mental health support. Seek urgent reassessment if vomiting, abdominal pain, yellow skin or eyes, confusion, fainting, or breathing problems develop.

- Is unconscious, collapsing, or difficult to wake
- Has trouble breathing or has stopped breathing
- Has a seizure
- Has severe agitation, hallucinations, or confusion
- Develops chest pain or a very irregular heartbeat
- Has a high temperature with muscle stiffness

- Took the medicine intentionally or may harm themselves

Common questions

How much Contac causes an overdose?

There is no single amount because products have different ingredients and strengths. Age, body size, health, timing, and other substances also affect risk. If more than directed was taken, contact a poison center rather than calculating the risk yourself.

What if I took too much but feel fine?

Feeling well does not rule out poisoning. Acetaminophen can cause delayed liver injury, and long-acting ingredients may take time to cause symptoms. Get poison-center advice immediately.

Can I manage a Contac overdose at home?

Only if a poison specialist reviews the exact situation and recommends home monitoring. Do not induce vomiting or use a home remedy. Serious poisoning may initially appear mild.

How long do overdose symptoms last?

Drowsiness, agitation, or heart-rate changes may last for hours and sometimes longer with extended-release products. Acetaminophen-related liver problems may develop over several days. The expected course depends on the product, tests, and response to treatment.

Will a Contac overdose cause permanent liver damage?

Not every Contac product contains acetaminophen, and not every acetaminophen overdose causes lasting injury. Prompt assessment and NAC treatment greatly reduce the risk. Severe or delayed poisoning can cause liver failure.

What information will Poison Control need?

Be ready to provide the person's age and approximate weight, exact product, active ingredients, amount possibly taken, time of exposure, symptoms, and other medicines or substances involved. Call even if some details are unknown.

Sources

- DailyMed: Contac Cold and Flu Maximum Strength Drug Facts labeling , US National Library of Medicine



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- Cold and cough medicine overdose , MedlinePlus Medical Encyclopedia, US National Library of Medicine
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