Summer is almost upon us, and with it comes more physical activity outside. While sports and activities are great for your health, they frequently cause minor injuries that can be treated without seeing a doctor. Over-the-counter pain relievers are a great way to lessen some of the pain associated with minor aches and pains. Most pain relievers are generally safe, but every year many patients are harmed when they take too much of a pain reliever or when they have a condition that makes it unwise to choose a particular pain reliever.

**NSAIDs [aspirin, ibuprofen (Motrin®, Advil®), naproxen (Aleve®)]**

NSAIDs, or non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs, are included in many common over-the-counter products used to treat pain. They are generally more effective than acetaminophen (Tylenol®) but have a higher risk for certain side effects, especially stomach irritation. Below are some tips that will help ensure that you can safely take over-the-counter NSAIDs for minor pains.

- Always follow the instructions printed on the bottle when taking an NSAID, unless directed otherwise by a doctor. Taking too much medication can lead to or worsen side effects of the medication.
- Make sure to maintain proper hydration by drinking plenty of water when taking NSAIDs. Taking NSAIDs while dehydrated can lead to kidney damage.
- Some people should not take NSAIDs, including people who are pregnant, taking blood thinners, or have kidney, gastrointestinal, or heart disease. If you have one of these conditions, talk with your doctor or pharmacist before choosing an over-the-counter pain reliever.

**Acetaminophen (Tylenol®, many cough and cold products)**

Acetaminophen (Tylenol®) is another common over-the-counter pain reliever. Acetaminophen is generally considered safer than NSAIDs, but often times is not as strong of a pain reliever. While acetaminophen is generally safe, the tips below will help ensure that you can decrease your risk of adverse effects.

- Like other over-the-counter medications, you should always follow the instructions on the bottle when taking acetaminophen. Taking too much medication has been known to cause liver injury and even liver failure. The recommended maximum dose for acetaminophen is 4,000 mg per day.
- Many prescription pain relievers and other over-the-counter products also contain acetaminophen. Because the risk of liver injury is highest when too much acetaminophen is taken, patients should be aware when they are taking multiple products that contain acetaminophen.
- Patients who have liver disease or frequently drink alcohol to excess should speak with their doctor or pharmacist before taking acetaminophen. Oftentimes, lower doses need to be used than with patients with normal liver function.

And as always, be sure to talk to your pharmacist about any medication questions you have!