POSITION STATEMENT

Over the Counter Medications

INTRODUCTION

Over-the-counter (OTC) medications, also known as non-prescription medications, are available to consumers for the treatment of common, minor illnesses. Over-the-counter medications may be administered in the occupational health setting, following pertinent state laws and administrative rules and organization policies.

RATIONALE/SUPPORTING INFORMATION

The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) recommends consumers work with health care professionals to choose and use OTC medications wisely. OTC medications generally have an acceptable safety margin and exhibit the following characteristics:

- Benefits outweigh risks
- The potential for abuse or misuse is low
- The consumer can purchase OTC medications for self-diagnosed conditions without a prescription
- Generally consumers can use OTC medications safely and effectively when following directions on the label and as directed by health care professionals.

(U.S. Food and Drug Administration, 2014; Litchfield S. M., 2010)

The provision of medications in the workplace is a recognized component of an occupational health service. The use of employer-provided medications can be beneficial for several reasons such as production savings due to prompt treatment of minor injury or illness.

Various state laws, including state nurse practice acts, pharmacy laws, and possibly, medical practice acts, govern the administration of medications. The occupational and environmental health nurse (OHN) should be knowledgeable about state laws and administrative rules related to implementing a pharmaceutical regimen (as a component of nursing practice). Knowledge of the applicable state laws is even more imperative in states that have implemented the Nurse Licensure Compact. Through the mutual recognition of state licenses, the nurse is held accountable for meeting all state practice laws in the state in which the individual is located at the time care is rendered (National Council of State Boards of Nursing, 2014). For example, some states may require standing orders while other states allow registered nurses to recommend OTC medication(s) for identified health-related needs as part of nursing practice. Occupational and environmental health nurses need to know the education, training, and licensure requirements of all staff working in the health facility, and ensure that all staff function within their educational preparation and scope of practice. In addition to knowledge of current laws affecting administration of OTC medications, OHNs must also keep abreast of any applicable proposed legislative changes.

MANAGEMENT OF OTC MEDICATIONS IN THE WORKPLACE

The use of standardized procedures, practice guidelines or standing orders are important to ensure safe, quality care to workers, particularly when OTC medications are made available in the workplace because such documents:

- Provide a legal safeguard for nursing practice by defining the minimum requirements for safe care.
- Reduce the risk of malfeasance when approved and signed by both the OHN and the physician.
- Represent a standard of care for measuring the care that is provided.
- Assure thoroughness and consistency of care when the same procedure is followed each time (quality assurance). Consequently, key items or questions are not overlooked.
- Specify who can do what. Clear and explicit nursing actions should match the scope of practice (accountability).
• Ensure continuity of care, especially when contract nurses and part-time nurses are employed in worksites.
• Accentuate continuing education as protocols, practice guidelines, or standing orders are periodically evaluated for appropriateness and accuracy. As knowledge increases and treatment approaches change, they must be updated to reflect those changes. Clinical knowledge and judgment are key factors in providing safe, quality health care.

ISSUES TO CONSIDER IN OTC MEDICATION MANAGEMENT

• Evaluate medications used in the occupational health setting in relationship to safety. Some OTC medications contain caffeine, pseudophedrine, diphenhydramine, alcohol, and other compounds that can induce drowsiness, impair performance, and possibly cause serious work-related injuries. As more and more prescription medicines are being made available over the counter, the potential for misuse exists.
• Employers need to be aware that all medications and substances (OTC medications, prescriptions, herbal supplements, etc.) brought by employees may impact safe job performance. The OHN can participate in the development of a company policy to address this issue if needed.
• Consider the effect of OTC medications on older workers. Older workers often have pre-existing chronic diseases such as heart disease, hypertension, diabetes, and arthritis. With some chronic diseases, the body may metabolize medications less effectively. It is not unusual for older adults to take five or more medications, sometimes several times per day (The Ohio Department of Aging, 2007a). The more medications an individual takes, the greater the risk for interactions with other prescription medicines, OTC medications, food, and alcohol. As individuals age, physiological changes affect the way medications interact with the body. Normal aging can alter the way medications are absorbed, metabolized, distributed, and excreted from the body.
• Be familiar with medications and their effects. Before administering any medication, the OHN must be familiar with the medication’s actions, side effects, interactions with food or other medication, and any precautions to be taken. The nurse must determine if the worker has any allergies, and ask workers about any other medications, OTC and prescription, they are currently taking. Workers should be educated about potential medication interactions. The nurse should have an accessible reference on commonly occurring OTC/prescription medication interactions (e.g. the Physicians’ Desk Reference (2014) available in hardcopy, as an eBook or online.) Workers should also be educated about the importance of reading and understanding the labels on medications.
• Be prepared for adverse reactions to certain medications. Keep necessary antidotes on hand. This is essential, as the occupational and environmental health nurse must anticipate any untoward effects of medication.
• Check the medications expiration dates on a regular basis. Out of date / expired medications must be removed from inventory and disposed of appropriately.

OPTIONS FOR OTC MEDICATIONS IN THE WORKPLACE

Options exist for OTC medication use in the occupational health setting. Based on state laws and related administrative rules, staffing patterns, policy of the worksite, and workforce acceptance, occupational and environmental health nurses can determine which option(s) best fit their particular situation. Often a combination of alternatives can be used to meet the health needs of workers. The following options are listed in order of no involvement of the nurse to the highest level of nurse involvement and responsibility.

1. Eliminate the use of over-the-counter medications. Some worksites make this decision to help reduce costs if workers use OTC medications for non-occupational problems.
2. Consider offering a vending machine to provide all workers access to OTC medications. Workers decide what medication they want and purchase it, thus accepting responsibility for their action and health care. Establish a contract with a vendor for the vending machine. Decide which unit dose medications should be included, the amount to be stocked, frequency of restocking with attention to expiration dates, etc.
3. Develop a worker self-administered medication system. Such a system can be an appropriate way to provide OTC medication when the nurse is not available, free up nursing time, and promote self-care. The worker, not the OHN, selects the medication. However, the OHN determines what medications will be available in what quantity. The medications need to be unit dose with self-explanatory directions on the label. An informational sheet should be posted identifying what medications are available and for what purpose. The informational sheet should be signed by the physician and the nurse. The OHN should teach workers about safe self-medication management including: reading labels before selecting OTC medications, medication use, ingredients, warnings, directions, cautions, side effects, and expiration date importance. (The Ohio Department of Aging, 2007b; Vélez- McEvoy,
The availability and usage of OTC medications in first aid kits is not recommended and should be addressed in company policy.

4. Develop nursing guidelines with standing orders or protocols to direct the use of OTC medications in the workplace. Determine if standing orders can be used in the state by reviewing the nurse practice act and related administrative rules, as well as any applicable practice alerts. A variety of formats - narrative, algorithm, or decision tree - can be used for the nursing guidelines or protocols with standing orders. Select a format and use it consistently. Components of guidelines or protocols should include health condition/problem, problem determination, clinical objectives, assessment criteria with nursing and pharmaceutical interventions, medical referral criteria, and follow-up activities, including worker education. The nursing guidelines or protocols with standing orders should be written, dated, approved, and signed by a licensed physician and nursing staff. They should be reviewed at least annually, revised accordingly, and then dated and signed after each review.

AAOHN POSITION REGARDING OTC MEDICATIONS IN THE WORKPLACE

Occupational and environmental health nurses need to know and follow worksite policies and procedures pertinent to OTC medications. Once nurses assume responsibility for implementing a treatment and pharmaceutical regimen, they are held accountable for recognizing the effects of the medication including immediate desired effects, side effects, toxic effects, allergic reactions, unusual and unexpected effects, interaction with other medications, and changes in the worker’s condition that contraindicate continued administration of medication. They should also anticipate those effects, which may rapidly endanger a worker’s life or well-being, and make judgments and decisions about actions to take in the event adverse reactions occur, particularly as workforce populations are aging.

OTC medication management protocols, practice guidelines, or standing orders, in conjunction with occupational health nursing guidelines, are recommended to help guide nurses in providing safe, quality care to workers.

REFERENCES AND RESOURCES


For a copy of your state nursing practice act, contact your state Board of Nursing. Contact information is available online from the National Council of State Boards of Nursing at www.ncsbn.org. For a copy of your state pharmacy laws or medical practice act, contact your state Board of Pharmacy or Board of Medical Examiners.


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