

Cold & Flu Medicine Ingredient Chart (v3)

A pharmacist's guide to what's inside the box — and where the same drug hides twice. **One row = one specific product variant** (variants differ; always confirm the label you bought). Last reviewed: 2026-09-16.

Read this before you combine anything

- **Acetaminophen (Tylenol)** overdose sends roughly **56,000 people to the ER** and causes about **458 deaths** a year in the US (FDA, based on Nourjah et al. 2006).
- **More than 600** over-the-counter and prescription medicines contain acetaminophen.
- Daily ceiling: **4,000 mg** (FDA). One maker lowered its own labels to **3,000 mg**.
- Only **31%** of adults know Tylenol's active ingredient is acetaminophen (Wolf et al., 2011).
- In flu season, people go over 4 g/day **24% more often** than off-season (Shiffman et al., 2018, *BJCP*).

The matrix — one row per product variant, one column per active ingredient

	Acetaminophen (mg/dose)	Ibuprofen	Aspirin	Naproxen	Caffeine	Dextromethorphan	Doxylamine	Diphenhydramine	Chlorpheniramine	Phenylephrine	Pseudoephedrine	Guaifenesin
Pain / fever — single-ingredient & headache combos												
Tylenol Regular Strength	325	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Tylenol Extra Strength	500	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Tylenol PM	500	—	—	—	—	—	—	✓	—	—	—	—
Advil / Motrin	—	✓	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Aleve	—	—	—	✓	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Bayer / Ecotrin (aspirin)	—	—	✓	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Excedrin Extra Strength	250	—	✓	—	✓	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Goody's (headache powder)	260	—	✓	—	✓	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Midol Complete	500	—	—	—	✓	—	—	—	pyrilamine*	—	—	—
Daytime cold & flu — combos (note the acetaminophen)												
DayQuil LiquiCaps	325	—	—	—	—	✓	—	—	—	✓	—	—
DayQuil Severe	325	—	—	—	—	✓	—	—	—	✓	—	✓
Theraflu Daytime Severe (packet)	650	—	—	—	—	✓	—	—	—	✓	—	—
Alka-Seltzer Plus Day	325	—	—	—	—	✓	—	—	—	✓	—	—
Coricidin HBP Max Flu*	325	—	—	—	—	✓	—	—	✓	—	—	—
Nighttime cold & flu — combos (acetaminophen + a sedating antihistamine)												
NyQuil LiquiCaps	325	—	—	—	—	✓	✓	—	—	—	—	—
NyQuil Severe	325	—	—	—	—	✓	✓	—	—	✓	—	—
Theraflu Nighttime (packet)*	650	—	—	—	—	—	—	✓	—	✓	—	—
Alka-Seltzer Plus Night*	325	—	—	—	—	✓	✓	—	—	✓	—	—
Coricidin HBP Cold & Flu	325	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	✓	—	—	—
Cough / mucus — single ingredient vs combos												
Mucinex (plain)	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	✓
Mucinex DM	—	—	—	—	—	✓	—	—	—	—	—	✓
Mucinex Fast-Max Cold & Flu	325	—	—	—	—	✓	—	—	—	✓	—	✓
Robitussin DM	—	—	—	—	—	✓	—	—	—	—	—	✓
Robitussin CF	—	—	—	—	—	✓	—	—	—	✓	—	✓
Decongestants, allergy & sleep												
Sudafed PE (oral)	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	✓	—	—
Sudafed (pseudoephedrine)	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	✓	—
Claritin-D / Zyrtec-D / Allegra-D	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	✓	—
Benadryl	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	✓	—	—	—	—
ZzzQuil	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	✓	—	—	—	—
Unisom SleepTabs	—	—	—	—	—	—	✓	—	—	—	—	—
Unisom SleepGels	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	✓	—	—	—	—

* Formulation varies by variant and gets reformulated — confirm on the label you hold. **Pyrilamine** is a sedating antihistamine (Midol's), not chlorpheniramine. The asterisk also marks rows with known dose-version variation (e.g. Coricidin HBP Max Flu: 325 mg in newer labeling, 500 mg in older).
✓ = that ingredient is typically present. Strengths are typical label values, not a promise. **One row = one variant** — that is the whole point: don't assume every product with the same brand name has the same contents.

The stack that lands you in trouble

One ordinary sick day, three products, no "extra" doses, every box opened and taken as directed:

What	Acetaminophen
DayQuil at breakfast and lunch (2 doses)	650 mg
Two Extra Strength Tylenol at 3 p.m. for the fever	1,000 mg
NyQuil at bedtime	325 mg
One Theraflu packet at 11 p.m. when the chills came back	650 mg
Total	2,625 mg

Still "following the box." One more Theraflu packet puts you at **3,275 mg** — 82% of the way to the 4,000 mg ceiling, and a final Tylenol dose before bed crosses the line.

In my 17 years at a hospital dispensing window, this exact pattern — separate boxes, each used correctly, total over the line — is the one I see most. The person doing it never thinks they doubled anything.

The doubles that aren't acetaminophen

- Sedating-antihistamine pile-up (diphenhydramine + doxylamine):** Tylenol PM + NyQuil + Benadryl + Alka-Seltzer Plus Night → heavy sedation and anticholinergic load. Highest risk in older adults (falls, confusion, urinary retention).
- NSAID pile-up (ibuprofen + naproxen + aspirin):** Advil + Aleve + Bayer, or aspirin + Excedrin → GI bleeding, kidney strain, raised blood pressure. **Avoid stacking two NSAIDs.**
- Decongestant pile-up (phenylephrine + pseudoephedrine):** DayQuil + Sudafed PE + Claritin-D → racing heart, insomnia, higher blood pressure.
- Dextromethorphan (DXM) pile-up:** NyQuil + Robitussin DM + Mucinex DM → sedation; interacts with some antidepressants (serotonin risk).

The 10-second label check

Ignore the brand name. Turn the box over and read the **"Active ingredients"** panel.

- Is **acetaminophen** listed? If you see it on two boxes, you only get **one** of them today.
- Is **ibuprofen, naproxen, or aspirin** listed? If you see any of these on two boxes, pick **one**.

Sources: FDA consumer update on acetaminophen (56,000 ER visits / 458 deaths per year, citing Nourjah et al. 2006; 600+ products; 4,000 mg daily limit). Shiffman S, et al. "Acetaminophen misuse/overuse during cold and flu season." *Br J Clin Pharmacol*, 2018. Wolf MS, et al. "Risk of unintentional overdose with non-prescription acetaminophen products." *J Gen Intern Med*, 2011.

Not medical advice. For education only; does not replace the product label, your doctor, or your pharmacist. If you think you have taken too much acetaminophen, call Poison Control (US: 1-800-222-1222) right away — the antidote works best early, and symptoms often don't show until damage is already done.

Last reviewed: **2026-09-16**. Prepared by **Lin Kai, Licensed Pharmacist** (registered in China; 17 years of hospital pharmacy practice). Formulations shown are typical US values and change over time.