

# 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<br>(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*                                                   | 500                        | —         | —       | —        | —        | ✓                | —          | —               | ✓                | —             | —               | —           |
| 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: 500 mg in newer labeling, 325 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          |
| <b>Total</b>                                             | <b>2,625 mg</b> |

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.