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Five Medications that are Not Good to Take that have been Commonly Used

This page offers excerpts from an article by Trisha Pasricha published March 16, 2026 in the Washington Post

Here's the link to the [Original article](#)

Some of us have a medicine cabinet that looks less like a pharmacy and more like a museum. It's good to take an inventory of medications you have in your home to toss out those that have expired or are not useful.

#1 Baby aspirin (81mg): Many take as a prevention of a heart attack or stroke. Evidence shows that this does not prevent either of these problems. First, it is not safe for children and is supposed to reduce clotting. It doesn't do this well as a prevention, but if you have had a heart attack or a stroke, it offers a little protection to avoid more complications. For people who have never had a heart attack or stroke, the data found that the bleeding risks from aspirin, including gastrointestinal bleeding, outweighed the cardiovascular benefits.

Final verdict? It's not worth the effort unless you have a need. Toss it and don't look back.

#2 The decongestant Phenylephrine, which is an active ingredient in many popular over-the-counter nasal decongestants. In 2023 the Food and Drug Administration advisory committee voted unanimously that, based on the data, phenylephrine is no more effective than a placebo. It turns out phenylephrine gets so thoroughly absorbed in the gut before it reaches circulation, very little of it makes it to your nasal passages.

Pseudoephedrine does work to shrink sinus mucous membranes, but in a nasal spray can be habit forming. This drug is now only available behind the counters at pharmacies as some folks cooked it down in quantity to make crystal methamphetamine. So, that medication is not routinely available.

Final verdict? If you see phenylephrine in a pill form, it's useless. The other drug, pseudoephedrine, is not all that great either and can be habit forming. It's best to avoid both of these.

#3 Colace has been around for decades with the goal of helping address a good bowel movement due to constipation.

Colace doesn't work better than a placebo when used as a stand-alone stool softener - and the evidence has been pretty clear for years. As far back as the 1950s it was known that that docusate sodium (Colace) provides no statistically significant benefit over a placebo for constipation. More effective medications can be used for constipation including psyllium fiber in liquid, pills, or capsules.

Final verdict? Don't waste your money on Colace (docusate sodium) pills.

#4 The antihistamine Diphenhydramine (which is the active ingredient in Benadryl) feels harmless because it's been around forever and is fairly inexpensive. It is not harmless, particularly for older people. There is a strong recommendation to avoid this medication in the elderly due to side effects including confusion, sedation, dry mouth, constipation, urinary retention and a higher risk of falling down. Older adults clear it from their systems much more slowly than younger people, meaning it hangs around longer and hits harder. This is especially crucial to consider when you're already on other common medications such as certain antidepressants, bladder drugs or stomach medications. Adding diphenhydramine can complicate health problems.

Final verdict? Use only in younger adults and occasionally in children, but if you are over 65 it's best to avoid this medication.

#5 Codeine-containing cough syrup: Research has proven that codeine does not suppress a cough. It is no more effective than a placebo for reducing a cough from the common cold. What codeine does reliably produce is constipation, sedation and, in rare cases, respiratory depression. It also carries the risk of dependence, so leftover bottles are exactly the kind of thing that shouldn't be left sitting around accessible to family members.

Final verdict? Avoid codeine-containing cough syrups.

Evidence changes and the above reflect results of studies that point to a change in how we take medication that help and do away with drugs that do not help or may do harm.

The above information was reviewed and validated by David Campbell-O'Dell, DNP, APRN-IP, FNP-BC, FAANP