



Medicine Safety Tips for Eye and Ear Medicine

Medicines used to treat ear and eye conditions are common. They may be prescribed by your doctor or purchased over-the-counter (OTC). Most ear and eye medicines are liquid drops that come in containers that look similar. But they also come in other forms such as ointments. You probably have used ear and/or ear drops before, are using them now, or have them in your medicine cabinet at home. Most people do not realize there is important safety information to keep in mind when using these medicines. Mistakes and misuse of these medicines can lead to injury.

One of the biggest safety concerns is mixing up the different types of medicine drops. This usually happens because the bottles of medicine look similar, as stated earlier. For example, the following types of errors have happened:

- Mix-ups between eye and ear drops
- Mix-ups between different bottles of eye drops or different bottles of ear drops
- Mix-ups between pet medicine drops used for eyes and/or ears and human medicine drops used for eyes and/or ears
- Mix-ups between nasal drops and eye and/or ear drops
- Mix-ups between other medicine that comes in a dropper bottle, such as clotrimazole (Lotrimin) topical solution (used to treat athlete's foot), and eye and/or ear drops
- Mix-ups between household products that come in dropper bottles and medicine used for the eyes and/or ears

**There are also concerns that similar errors may also occur with ointments that are used to treat eye conditions.*

Safety Tips When Using Eye and/or Ear Medicine

- ✓ **Separate different medicine drops.** If you use different medicine drops that come in similarly shaped dropper bottles, store them in separate locations. Keep pet medicines away from human medicines. Always store household products that come in a dropper bottle (for example, nail glue) away from medicine.
- ✓ **Take at different times.** If you use different drops (for example, both eye and ear drops), take them at different times, if possible.
- ✓ **Turn the light on.** Any time you take medicine, be sure to turn on the light so you can see what you are doing. Never take medicine in the dark.

- ✓ **Keep the medicine in the original box.** Keep your eye and ear drops in their original box. Many eye and ear drops have a picture of an eye or ear on the box but not on the medicine bottle. Also, the box will contain the Drug Facts label which tells you how to take the medicine. It is important to read the Drug Facts label so you know what is in the medicine, the purpose for using the medicine, the dosing information, and any precautions you should take while using the medicine.
- ✓ **Discard leftover medicine drops.** Prescription eye and/or ear drops should only be taken for as long as your doctor told you. Discard any leftover drops. For OTC eye and/or ear drops, write the date you opened the drops on the label. Throw the bottle away after four weeks. Never use eye or ear drops past the expiration date even if they were never opened.
- ✓ **Confirm the medicine is correct.** Take a “time out” before using eye and/or ear drops to confirm that the correct bottle of medicine is in your hand. Read the label out loud. Consider adding a rubber band or hair tie around one of the medicine bottles if you use more than one type of drop. This will help you tell the difference between the containers especially if you have poor eyesight.
- ✓ **Never swallow eye or ear drops.** OTC eye drops, such as Visine and similar products contain active ingredients (e.g., tetrahydrozoline, oxymetazoline, or naphazoline) that can be very harmful if swallowed. Never store Visine or similar products in diaper bags, purses, or areas where children can easily access them.
- ✓ **Avoid overusing OTC eye drops to treat sore eyes.** If you overuse eye drops for sore or red eyes, your symptoms may get worse. Many OTC eye drops contain decongestants (ingredients that shrink swollen blood vessels), such as naphazoline, tetrahydrozoline, or phenylephrine. Too much of these decongestants can lead to conjunctivitis (pink eye) – a severe eye infection that can spread from person to person very easily. It could take weeks for this condition to clear up.
- ✓ **Check your prescription medicine drops at the pharmacy.** Some packaging for prescription eye and ear medicines look similar. This may cause the pharmacist to accidentally select the wrong medicine. Always open the bag and check your prescription at the pharmacy. Make sure it is what you were expecting. Sometimes, eye drops can be safely used as ear drops, but check with your pharmacist before you use any eye drops in your ears.
- ✓ **Store your eye and ear drops at the proper temperature.** Store your eye and ear drops at the temperature listed on the package labeling. Some drops may require refrigeration, while others may be stored at room temperature. Keep your drops out of direct sunlight and excessive heat. Never store eye or ear drops in your car's glove compartment or trunk.
- ✓ **Do not forget to add eye and ear drops on your medicine list.** Always remember to include any prescription or OTC eye and/or ear medicine on your medicine list.