

Ask The Expert: Keeping Over-the-Counter Medications in the First Aid Room



QUESTION

Is it a good practice to have over-the-counter (OTC) medicines like Tylenol available in our first aid room? We have done so in the past but given our attendants strict instructions not to administer the meds but instead require workers to self-medicate.

–BC Employer

ANSWER

First of all, OTC meds aren't an OHS requirement for a first aid room or kit in BC nor, I suspect, any other jurisdiction. So that raises the question of whether making OTC meds available to workers is a best practice. And that issue is subject to debate. I've seen arguments on both sides:

* The Mayo Clinic says YES, <https://www.mayoclinic.org/first-aid/first-aid-kits/basics/art-20056673>

* Alberta OHS guidelines say NO <http://work.alberta.ca/documents/OHS-bulletin-fa014.pdf>

Alas, I couldn't find anything from WorkSafeBC addressing the issue.

EXPLANATION: 5 LIABILITY RISKS TO CONSIDER

The one thing I DO know, though, is that making OTC meds available to your workers exposes you to liability risks:

- The worker may have an allergic reaction;
- There may be dangerous side effects, e.g., drowsiness;
- The meds may be addictive;
- The worker may actually be an addict;
- The worker may feel like he/she HAS to take the stuff.

MY ADVICE

My advice is to ask WorkSafeBC or your insurer what they think. And if you do decide to make OTC meds available, take 3 precautions to protect yourself:

1. Your point about self-medicating is right on'DON'T administer the meds yourself but require workers to self-medicate;
2. Where possible, provide the meds in individual packets;
and
3. Maintain small quantities, not bulk supplies.