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The home medicine cabinet

A practical guide to what to keep, how to organise it and how to maintain it safely.

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Why I prepared this guide

During my years behind the pharmacy counter, one question has come up almost every day: “What should we actually keep at home?” A well-organised medicine cabinet can prevent Sunday-evening panic, unnecessary duplicate purchases and, most importantly, poor decisions in an urgent moment.

This guide gives you a practical checklist organised by situation, not by cupboard shelf. It deliberately contains no doses or dosing schedules. These are individual and depend on age, weight, other conditions and the medicines already being taken. Always discuss them with your pharmacist or doctor.

Three golden rules

1 Choose a dry, dark place that children cannot reach
Bathrooms and kitchens are poor choices because of moisture and temperature changes. Choose a closed cupboard in a hallway or bedroom, placed high and locked when young children are at home. Follow the storage temperature on each pack.

2 Keep everything in its original packaging with the leaflet
The packaging protects the product and identifies it. The leaflet tells you what it is for, how to store it and when it expires. Loose tablets in an unlabelled box create an unnecessary risk of error.

3 Review the cabinet twice a year
Check expiry dates and quantities in spring and autumn. Return expired or unwanted medicines through a pharmacy or local take-back route where available. Do not flush a medicine unless its own instructions specifically say to do so.[1]

> ### A small habit with a big effect
>
> Write down the phone numbers of your doctor, the nearest duty pharmacy and the European emergency number 112. Keep the note in the cabinet. In an emergency, nobody searches calmly for a number.

The checklist

Tick what you already have and note what is missing before your next pharmacy visit. Choose the specific product and form, such as tablets, syrup or suppositories, with a pharmacist. This matters even more when the cabinet will be used for children.

1. Pain and fever

Item	What to check
Pain and fever medicine for adults	Paracetamol or ibuprofen may be options, selected according to your conditions and other medicines.
A child-appropriate form when children live at home	A product and measuring device suited to the child’s age and weight. Never guess a dose from the adult product.
Thermometer	A digital thermometer with a working battery.

2. Stomach and bowel problems

Item	What to check
Oral rehydration salts	For vomiting and diarrhoea. Check age suitability and prepare exactly as directed on the pack.
Probiotic, if recommended	Optional rather than essential. The evidence and usefulness depend on the strain and the situation.
Heartburn remedy	An antacid for occasional symptoms, after checking interactions and the cause of recurring symptoms.

3. Allergy

Item	What to check
Antihistamine	For hives, insect bites or mild allergic symptoms. Choice and suitability depend on age, conditions and other medicines.
Prescribed emergency treatment for a known severe allergy	Keep it available and in date if your doctor has prescribed it. Make sure the household knows when and how to use it.

4. Cuts, minor burns and skin problems

Item	What to check
Skin antiseptic	For cleaning minor scratches and cuts, used according to the product instructions.
Sterile gauze and dressings	Compresses, a bandage and plasters in several sizes.
Panthenol skin product	An optional soothing product for minor superficial skin irritation. More serious burns need assessment.
Sterile saline	For wound cleansing. Use sterile single-dose eye products for eyes, not a general nasal spray.

5. Colds: nose and throat

Item	What to check
Nasal saline spray	For nasal hygiene and congestion. Choose a form suitable for the person’s age.
Throat lozenges	For adults and children only above the age stated on the pack. Lozenges can be a choking hazard for young children.
Nasal aspirator	Useful when there is a baby at home. Learn how to clean and use it gently.

6. Tools and supplies

Item	What to check
Tweezers and small scissors	For dressings and removing a superficial splinter. Do not dig deeply into skin.
Medical tape	For securing a dressing.
Disposable gloves	For treating another person’s wound.

Situations that require individual advice

Babies and young children. Doses are usually weight-based and many products have age limits. Never give a child an adult medicine, even in a smaller amount.
Pregnancy and breastfeeding. Ask a doctor or pharmacist before any medicine, supplement or herbal product.
Chronic conditions and older age. Keep an up-to-date medicine list in the cabinet and check even ordinary over-the-counter products for interactions.

When the medicine cabinet is not the answer

Do not rely on self-treatment for severe, sudden or unusual pain; swelling of the face with breathing difficulty; vomiting or diarrhoea with signs of dehydration; a wound that will not stop bleeding; or symptoms that are rapidly getting worse. Seek medical care and call 112 in an emergency.

A baby under 3 months with a temperature of 38°C or higher needs urgent medical assessment. For an older child, seek advice when fever persists, the child becomes more unwell, or you are worried. Do not delay care because a home medicine has lowered the temperature.[2]

Maintenance: little and often

- Review expiry dates and quantities twice a year.
- Replace items after use so that the cabinet is useful when you need it.
- Keep an up-to-date list of regular medicines, allergies and important conditions.
- Check storage instructions after travel, refrigeration or a power cut.

> **Have a question? Ask Didi.**
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> On mom-pharma.com you will find the free “Ask Didi” chat, where I answer questions about medicines, food supplements and health care personally. Registration is quick and free, and the answers use clear language.
>
> **www.mom-pharma.com**

Sources

[1] U.S. Food and Drug Administration. (2025). *Where and how to dispose of unused medicines*.

[2] NHS. (2026). *High temperature (fever) in children*.

This guide is for information only and does not replace advice from a doctor or pharmacist. It contains no doses or dosing schedules. The choice, dose and suitability of every medicine must be assessed individually by a healthcare professional who knows your medical history. Call 112 if you suspect an emergency.

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