

UNIVERSITY STUDENT HEALTH SERVICES • Fact Sheet

Bismuth Subsalicylate (Pepto-Bismol)

Bismuth products are commonly used to treat diarrhea and stomach upset. They can also be used for the prevention of traveler's diarrhea. While bismuth is an excellent product when used properly, anyone who chooses to use bismuth should be aware of its possible side effects and contraindications to use.

Bismuth Drug Information

- Bismuth subsalicylate is an over-the-counter medication that can be used to treat mild diarrheal illness. It can also be used to prevent traveler's diarrhea, which is caused by the ingestion of contaminated food or water.
- Bismuth products are part of the Aspirin (salicylate) family.

Selected U.S. Product Names

- Pepto-Bismol, Bismatrol, Diotame, Kaopectate, Kao-Tin
- The Canadian formulation of Kaopectate does not contain bismuth.

Mechanism of Action

- Bismuth subsalicylate decreases the flow of fluids and electrolytes into the intestines.
- It also reduces inflammation within the intestines.
- It is believed to have antimicrobial properties against bacteria and viruses that cause diarrhea.

Adult Dosing

- To Prevent Traveler's Diarrhea:
 - Take 2 tablets (524mg total) every 6 hours daily – ingest before meals and at bedtime.
 - Maximum use: 2-3 weeks.
- To Treat Diarrhea:
 - Take 2 tablets or 30 ml (524 mg total) every 30 to 60 minutes until the diarrhea is controlled.
 - Maximum use: 8 doses (of 524 mg) in 24 hours.

Drug Interactions

Bismuth products can interact with a wide variety of medications. Examples include the following:

- Bismuth may interfere with the absorption of certain antibiotics (eg. Doxycycline). These medications should be taken either 2 hours before or 6 hours after taking a bismuth product.
- Avoid bismuth use if you are already taking aspirin, other salicylates, or nonsteroidal inflammatory drugs (eg. Ibuprofen/Advil/Motrin, naproxen/Aleve) due to the risk of overdose.
- Avoid bismuth use with ginkgo biloba as this combination can increase the risk of bleeding.

Side Effects

- Bismuth may turn the tongue and/or stool black. This is harmless and will resolve once the drug is stopped.
- Other side effects are uncommon and are usually due to overuse. Stop the medication and seek medical attention immediately if you develop any of these symptoms: anxiety, confusion, severe headache, slurred speech, hearing loss, persistent ringing in the ears, severe abdominal pain, severe constipation (or diarrhea), muscle spasms or weakness.

Do Not Use Bismuth Products If You:

- Are allergic to aspirin, other salicylates (including oil of wintergreen), or nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (eg. Advil/Motrin/ibuprofen, Aleve/naproxen, etc).
- Have a history of severe gastrointestinal bleeding or ulcers.
- Have a bleeding disorder or are taking a blood-thinning medicine.
- Are pregnant or breastfeeding.
- Have kidney disease.
- Have or are recovering from chickenpox, influenza, or a flu-like illness. Taking aspirin or bismuth in this setting increases the risk of Reye's syndrome, a rare condition that causes swelling in the brain and liver. Early signs include changes in behavior, nausea, and vomiting.