



Accurate Clinic

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Tylenol (acetaminophen) is the non-prescription medication commonly included as a component in many narcotic based pain medications including Norco, Vicodin, Percocet and others. When used alone it is effective for mild-moderate pain although, unlike the NSAIDs (ibuprofen, aspirin etc.), it has no anti-inflammatory properties and therefore may be less effective than NSAIDs for certain types of pain such as arthritis. While acetaminophen is considered perhaps the safest of all pain medications, the dosing margin of safety must be understood. Short-term and long-term toxicity to the liver and kidney is a risk and is even more so when the dosing exceeds the safety guidelines. The daily dose of acetaminophen which is considered to be safe for long term daily use is not that well established and is affected by the use of alcohol and other medications. The current thinking of most physicians is that a maximum of 4 gms/day is safe although there is growing concern on the part of some liver specialists that the maximum safe daily dose should be restricted to 3 gms/day or even less.

The following list indicates how much Tylenol (acetaminophen) is present in each commonly prescribed pain medication:

Norco: 325mg
Vicodin ES: 300mg
Vicodin HP: 300mg
Percocet: 325mg
Ultracet: 325mg
Fioricet: 325mg

What this means, for example, is that if one takes six Norco/day (i.e. 180/month), they are ingesting just under 2 gms/day of acetaminophen. This daily dose is well within the maximum safety margin of 4 gms/day and does not allow for the patient to take any other source of acetaminophen (i.e. a Fioricet) without exceeding the safe amount. Furthermore, it is my opinion that habitually riding at the maximum safe dosing limit is not wise. I know of no good studies that have definitively established the safety of these doses when taken daily for years or decades. I do not believe that medical science has a good grasp on how such long-term dosing of acetaminophen really does affect the liver and kidneys. It is my recommendation that whenever possible a limit of 3 gms/day would be wiser with a greater margin of long-term safety.

This means that if you are currently taking six Norco or Percocet/day, you should be diligent about not ingesting any other source of acetaminophen that would put you over 3gms/day or less. If you have a history of kidney or liver disease or you are a moderate or heavy user of alcohol, this recommendation applies even more so. Please discuss this with your physician.