Bismuth Medication for Prevention & Treatment of Diarrhea

Bismuth products can be used to either prevent or treat diarrhea, including 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 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, Kaopectate, Maalox Total Relief, Bismatrol.
- The Canadian formula of Kaopectate does not contain bismuth.

Mechanism of Action
- Bismuth subsalicylate stimulates absorption of water from the large intestine.
- It forms a protective coat on the lining of the intestines.
- It is believed to have antimicrobial properties against bacteria and viruses.

Adult Use
- Preventive Dosing:
  - 2 tablets (524mg total) every 6 hours daily – ingest before meals and at bedtime.
  - Maximum use: 3 weeks.
- Treatment Dosing:
  - 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.
- Precautions:
  - Bismuth may interfere with the absorption of certain antibiotics, oral contraceptives, and other medications. Medicines should be taken either 2 hours before or 6 hours after taking a bismuth product.
  - Use bismuth with caution if you are already taking aspirin or other salicylates as this may lead to overdose.

Side Effects
- Bismuth will turn the tongue and stool black. This resolves 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), and nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (such as ibuprofen, naproxen, etc).
- Have a history of severe gastrointestinal bleeding.
- Have a clotting disorder or are taking a blood thinning medicine.
- Are pregnant.
- Have kidney disease.
- Have or are recovering from chicken pox, 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.