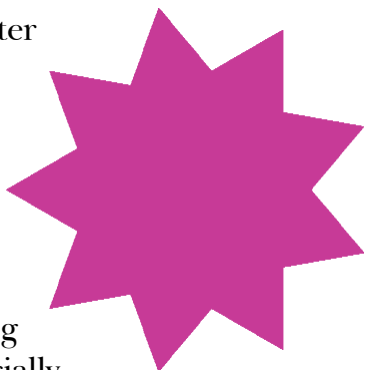


AgePage

Medicines: Use Them Safely

When Jerry, age 71, came home from the drug store with his latest medication, he placed all his pill bottles on the kitchen counter and counted them. “I take seven different medications,” he said to his wife. “We need a system. We need to know what medicines we have, what they’re for, and when we should take them.”

Modern medicine has made our lives better in many ways. It has helped older adults live longer, healthier lives. But people over 65 have to be careful when taking medications, especially when they’re taking many different drugs.



What Are Medicines? What Are Drugs?

Some people refer to the pills they take as “medicine” and other people call them “drugs.” Both words can refer to:

- ◆ medicines you get from a pharmacist with a doctor’s prescription,
- ◆ pills, liquids, or creams you buy without a prescription to use every now and then for aches and pains, or
- ◆ vitamins or dietary supplements you take regularly.

Drugs you get without a doctor’s prescription are called over-the-counter medicines. Because mixing certain medicines can cause problems, be sure to let your doctor know about all the prescription and over-the-counter drugs you are taking. Keep an updated list of medicines you are taking with you at all times.

Generic or Brand Name?

When getting a prescription filled, you may have a choice between either a generic or brand-name drug. Generic and brand-name

medicines are alike because they act the same way in the body and they contain the same active ingredients. The generic version works like the brand-name in dosage, safety, strength, performance, and use. Generic drugs often cost less.

If you want a generic drug, ask the pharmacist if that's a choice. Not all drugs are available in the generic form.

At Your Doctor's Office

You've gone to your doctor because you don't feel well. The doctor decides a medicine will help and writes a prescription. What should you do next?

- ◆ Tell your doctor or nurse about all the medicines you take whenever a new drug is prescribed.
- ◆ Remind your doctor or nurse about your allergies and any problems you have had with medicines, such as rashes, indigestion, dizziness, or mood changes.
- ◆ Find out the right way to take the medicine before you start using it. Ask questions. It might help to write down the answers. You might want to know:

- What is the name of the medicine, and why am I taking it?
- How many times a day should I take it and at what time? If the bottle says take “4 times a day,” does that mean 4 times in 24 hours or 4 times during the daytime?
- Should I take the medicine before, after, or between meals? Is there anything I should avoid eating when taking this medicine?
- What does “as needed” mean?
- When should I stop taking the medicine?
- If I forget to take my medicine, what should I do?
- What side effects can I expect? What should I do if I have a problem?

Ask Your Pharmacist

Your pharmacist is an important part of your healthcare team. He or she can answer many questions you

may have about your medicine. For example, a pharmacist can tell you how and when to take your medicine, whether a drug may interact with or affect another medicine you are taking, and any side effects you might have. Also, the pharmacist can answer questions about over-the-counter medications.

Try to have all your prescriptions filled at the same pharmacy so your records are in one place. The pharmacist will keep track of all your medications and will be able to tell you if a new drug might cause problems. If you're not able to use just one pharmacy, show the new pharmacist your list of medicines and over-the-counter drugs.

When you have a prescription filled:

- ◆ Make sure you can read and understand the name of the medicine and the directions on the container and on the color-coded warning stickers on the bottle. If the label is hard to read, ask your pharmacist to use larger type.
- ◆ Check that you can open the container; if not, ask the

pharmacist to put your medicines in bottles that are easier to open.

- ◆ Tell the pharmacist if you have trouble swallowing pills. There may be liquid medicine available. Do not chew, break, or crush tablets without first finding out if the drug will still work.
- ◆ Ask about special instructions on where to store a medicine. For example, should it be kept in the refrigerator or in a dry place?
- ◆ Read the label on your medicine before leaving the pharmacy. It should have your name on it and the directions prescribed by your doctor. If it doesn't, don't take it.

Now, It's Your Turn

Your doctor has prescribed a medication, the pharmacist has filled the prescription, and now it's up to you to take the medicine safely. Here are some tips that can help:

- ◆ Make a list of all the medicines you take. Show it to all your healthcare providers including physical therapists and dentists.

Keep one copy in your medicine cabinet and one in your wallet or pocketbook. The list should include the: name of each medicine, doctor who prescribed it, reason it was prescribed, amount you take, and time(s) you take it.

- ◆ Read and save all written information that comes with the medicine.
- ◆ Take your medicine in the exact amount and at the time your doctor prescribes.
- ◆ Call your doctor right away if you have any problems with your medicine or if you are worried that the medicine might be doing more harm than good. Your doctor may be able to change your medicine to a different one that will work better for you.
- ◆ Use a memory aid to take your medicines on time. Some people use meals or bedtime as reminders to take their medicine. Other people use charts, calendars, and weekly pill boxes to

remind them. Use a system that works for you.

- ◆ Do not skip doses of medication or take half doses to save money. Talk with your doctor or pharmacist if you can't afford the prescribed medicine. There may be less costly choices or special programs to help with the cost of certain drugs.
- ◆ Avoid mixing alcohol and medicine. Some medicines may not work correctly or may make you sick if taken with alcohol.
- ◆ Take your medicine until it's finished or until your doctor says it's okay to stop.
- ◆ Don't take medicines prescribed for another person or give yours to someone else.
- ◆ Don't take medicine in the dark. To avoid making a mistake, turn your light on before reaching for your pills.
- ◆ Check the expiration dates on your medicine bottles and throw away outdated medicines.

- ◆ Don't leave your medicine on a kitchen table or counter where a young child may get into it. Make sure you store all medicines and supplements out of sight and out of reach of children.

Remember, medicines that are strong enough to cure you can also be strong enough to hurt you if they aren't used the right way. Learn to be a smart consumer of medicine.

Medicare-Approved Drug Discount Cards

Medicare is contracting with private companies to offer Medicare-approved drug discount cards. These discount cards can help save on prescription drug costs. All discount cards approved by Medicare will have this seal:

Medicare_{Rx}
Prescription Drug Coverage

For more information about this program call 1-800-MEDICARE (1-800-633-4227) or visit the website www.medicare.gov.

For More Information

The following groups offer information on medication use:

Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality (AHRQ)

540 Gaither Road
Rockville, MD 20850
800-358-9295 (toll-free)
www.ahrq.gov

Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS)

7500 Security Boulevard
Baltimore, MD 21244-1850
877-267-2323 (toll-free)
www.cms.hhs.gov/

Food and Drug Administration

5600 Fishers Lane
Rockville, MD 20857
888-463-6332 (toll-free)
www.fda.gov

Partnership for Prescription Assistance

888-477-2669
www.pparx.org

**The Peter Lamy Center for
Drug Therapy and Aging**

University of Maryland
School of Pharmacy
515 West Lombard Street
Suite 166
Baltimore, MD 21201
410-706-2434 (within MD)
or 877-706-2434 (toll-free outside MD)
www.pharmacy.umaryland.edu/lamy

For more information on health
and aging, contact:

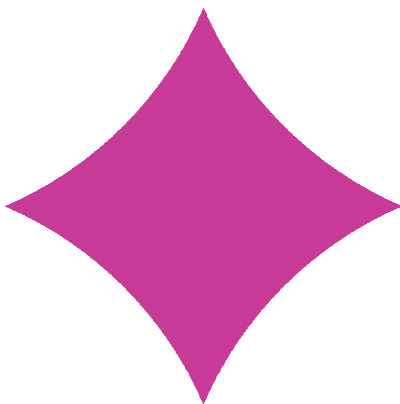
**National Institute on Aging
Information Center**

P.O. Box 8057
Gaithersburg, MD 20898-8057
800-222-2225 (toll-free)
800-222-4225 (TTY/toll-free)
niaic@jbsl.com

To order publications (in English or
Spanish) or sign up for regular email
alerts, visit: www.niapublications.org

The National Institute on Aging
website is www.nia.nih.gov.

Visit NIHSeniorHealth.gov
(www.nihseniorhealth.gov), a senior-
friendly website from the National
Institute on Aging and the National
Library of Medicine. This simple-to-
use website features popular health
topics for older adults, including
information on using medicines
safely. It has large type and a
“talking” function that reads
the text out loud.



National Institute on Aging

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Human Services
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