

These books provide more information:

Safe use of Medications by Older People. National Institutes of Health, National Institute on Aging. Bethesda, MD: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2000

Consumer Reports Books and the U.S. Pharmacopeial Convention. *Complete Drug Reference.* Mount Vernon, NY: December 2002.

The People's Pharmacy Guide to Home and Herbal Remedies, Joe S. Greadon and Teresa Greadon. New York: St. Martin's Press, Inc., 2002.

The Pill Book, Harold M. Silverman. New York: Bantam Books, Inc., 2002.

Waltz, Mitzi, editor. *Webster's New World Medical Dictionary.* New York: IDG Books Worldwide, February 2000.

Web sites:

Health Finder: www.healthfinder.gov

Food & Drug Administration, Center for Drug Evaluation & Research: www.fda.gov/cder

Getting Well Network: www.pdr.net

National Council on Patient Information and Education: www.talkaboutrx.org

National Library of Medicine: www.nlm.nih.gov

Recommendations and Safety Tips



HOW TO PREVENT MEDICATION ERRORS



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Sponsored through an unrestricted educational grant from Medco Health Solutions



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RECOMMENDATIONS AND SAFETY TIPS— HOW TO PREVENT MEDICATION ERRORS

Unfortunately, medication errors occasionally occur. These errors can happen when you are a patient in the hospital, when you get prescriptions filled at your local pharmacy, mail order pharmacy, on-line pharmacy, or even when you take your medicines in your own home. This may seem scary, but luckily even when a mistake does occur there are usually no serious effects. Yet sadly, every once in a while these mistakes can hurt you or a family member. For this reason, it is very important that you take an active role in your own care by learning about your medicines.

Just like when you fly in an airplane, it is in your best interest to read the emergency information sheet, listen to the flight attendant, buckle your seat belt, and know where the nearest exit is. It is also in your best interest to know about your medications, learn how and when to take them, what the effects and side effects are. The best place to get this information is from your doctor, pharmacist, or nurse. If you would like more information you can visit web sites, a bookstore or library. But, you have to be very careful when reading about your medications because not all the information that you find may be accurate. On the back page of this pamphlet there is a list of some reliable web sites and books to learn more about your medicines.

Your doctors, nurses, and pharmacists work very hard to give you safe care and to prevent mistakes. But, you can also help to prevent mistakes. This pamphlet tells you why some medication errors occur, even when steps are in place to stop these errors. In addition, it will provide you with some safety tips on how to prevent these errors from happening to you and your family.

WHILE YOU ARE IN THE HOSPITAL...

PROBLEM

A mistake can happen to you if the hospital staff doesn't have all the information they need to make the right medication decisions. For example, you may feel uncomfortable telling the doctor that you are using over-the-counter medicines or an "alternative" drug therapy such as herbal remedies or nutritional supplements. If you do not tell them about **all** your medicines, you could be putting yourself at risk for a serious drug/herbal interaction or a false blood test result.

RECOMMENDATION

Always keep an up-to-date complete drug list. This list should have all of the current medicines you are taking. Also mark down any drugs that you are allergic to and describe what happens to you when you take that medicine. Include drugs that are ordered by your doctors, over-the-counter medicines, vitamins, nutritional supplements, and herbal products. Take all of your prescription medications and other drugs to the hospital with you so that the doctor or nurse can look them over to identify them and then send them home with your family.

TIP

To start your drug history, have your pharmacist(s) give you a printout from the computer, which lists all of the drugs that you are now taking. Make copies of your drug history. Keep one with you in your wallet and give one to a family member. Remember to keep the list up-to-date.

PROBLEM

You could receive the wrong medicine if you are not wearing a patient identification or barcode bracelet or if someone gives you medicine without first checking your bracelet.

RECOMMENDATION

Do not let anyone give you medicines without checking your patient identification or barcode bracelet first. Hold out your wrist so that they can read your name or scan a barcode. Look at all of your medicines before you take them. If a medication doesn't look like what you usually take, ask why **before** you take it. It might be a generic drug (which is okay), or it might be the wrong drug.

TIP

*Ask your nurse to give you a list of the drugs that you are taking while you are in the hospital (with the generic and brand names for each) and what times you should expect the medicines. Ask your nurse to keep your drugs in their original package and to open them at your bedside right before giving them to you. If anything seems wrong, or if you think a dose was missed, ask the nurse to check it out **before** you take the drug.*



PROBLEM

Although rare, it's possible that you could receive the wrong medicine when a new medicine is ordered for you. This can happen when the doctor writes the order for the drug, when the pharmacy fills the order, or when the nurse gives the medication.

RECOMMENDATION

Tell your doctor and nurse you want to know the name of any new medicine that is ordered and what it's being used for, so that you can make sure that it is the right medicine for you. If you are not sure that the medicine is really for you, don't take the medicine until you get an answer that makes sense to you.

TIP

When a new medicine is ordered and you are not familiar with it, ask your nurse for some written information about the drug.

PROBLEM

Sometimes a drug is given to you before your healthcare providers know if you have any drug, dye, or food allergies. A mistake can happen if you get a drug or dye that you have an allergy to or take a drug that has a food product that you are allergic to.

RECOMMENDATION

Whenever a new medicine is ordered or you get a new medication, remind your doctor and nurse that you have an allergy. It is also important to ask if you will need any dyes or special medications before a test or procedure is performed.

PROBLEM

When you are in the hospital you are often started on new medications and occasionally your doctor will change the dose of a drug that you had been taking. Occasionally, mistakes can happen when you are ready to go home because your drug list was not updated before leaving the hospital.

RECOMMENDATION

Make sure that when you are ready to leave the hospital that the doctor, pharmacist, or nurse goes over each medication (name of drug, dose, when to take it, etc.) with you and/or a family member. When you get home remember to update and make any changes in your medication list. Know the brand and generic names so you don't take duplicates medications.

TIP

While you are in the hospital you can always ask to talk with a pharmacist about the new drugs you are taking. Also, get the name of your doctor and his/her phone number so that if there is a problem with your medications, you and/or your pharmacist can contact him/her to clarify the correct medications you should be taking.

TIP

Ask your nurse to make sure your allergy is listed on the chart and that the pharmacy has also entered this information into their computer. Consider buying a MedAlert bracelet if you have a severe allergy to drugs or foods such as penicillin or shellfish.

AT THE DOCTOR'S OFFICE...

PROBLEM

Getting drug samples is a good way to see how a drug will work for you before you get a prescription filled. However, they can cause problems. Sometimes mistakes can happen if your allergies are not checked or if the sample drug has any interactions with your other prescription medicines, over-the-counter drugs, herbals, etc., that you are taking. For example, aspirin is a common allergy and people with this allergy cannot take non-steroidal anti-inflammatory medicines such as Motrin and Toradol.

RECOMMENDATION

If you have any allergies, remind your doctor about them before taking samples. Ask him/her to check the sample medicine against the medicines you are taking to make sure there are no bad interactions. Even though the sample medicine will have some information on the package, ask the doctor to explain the reason for the medication, how to take the medicine, including any mixing instructions, what side effects to look for or anything special you should know about the drug.

TIP

If your doctor does not check the sample medicine with a drug information book or special computer, you might want to ask your pharmacist to check out the drug for you. He/she can make sure that there are no problems with allergies or side effects before you start the medicine. Also, check the expiration date on the package, as samples may be stored for a long period of time in a doctor's office before use.

PROBLEM

Your doctor hands you a prescription and tells you to have it filled. He/she doesn't tell you the name of the drug, how to take it or what types of side effects you may experience. Sometimes doctors do not provide enough information on the drugs they prescribe, leaving you in the dark as to what to expect.

RECOMMENDATION

Prescribers can help you learn more about your drugs by offering you patient information sheets. These patient education tools provide information on the name of the drug, why it's prescribed and the most common side effects you might experience.

TIP

Always ask your prescriber to not only tell you the name of the drug he/she prescribes for you, but to include other important information such as why it's taken and possible side effects. A printed information sheet is a good source of information but the pharmacist is the best source of information on how to safely use prescription and nonprescription drugs.



IN YOUR HOME...

PROBLEM

Mistakes can occur when people have trouble swallowing a tablet or capsule and they try to chew, crush, break or mix the tablet or capsule in food or drink. This can cause a bad effect because some are long-acting medicines that will be released too fast. Other medicines either will not work properly or could even make you sick.

RECOMMENDATION

If you have trouble swallowing medicines, ask your doctor or pharmacist if the drug comes in a liquid. Never chew, crush, break or mix the tablet or capsule in fluid unless your doctor or pharmacist says it is all right to do so.

TIP

Some medications are long acting or have a special release mechanism that can be altered or destroyed when you change the drug in any way. As a general rule, if the drug's name is followed by the letters "LA" (long acting), "CR" (controlled released), "SR" (sustained release), etc., or the drug is to be taken every 12 hours or once a day, you have to swallow the tablet or capsule whole for it to work right. This rule is also true for over-the-counter medicines that are long acting. Take your medications with water rather than other liquids because these might change how your drug works.

PROBLEM

You can have a bad effect if you take certain medicines that are old (past the expiration date). While most medications will only lose their strength, some outdated medicines can actually become toxic and make you sick.

RECOMMENDATION

Do not save old medicines. Check your medicines (prescription and over-the-counter) every 6 months for their expiration date and get rid of all drugs that are out of date. If you have any questions about outdated medications, call your pharmacist before you take it.

TIP

Flush any old medicine you have been saving including used patches (cut up), down the toilet and not in the trash or wastebasket. This is important because children and pets have been known to find the medicine and even eat them.

PROBLEM

If you have a long-term condition (heart condition, diabetes, etc.), you may have to take many different kinds of medications. Sometimes, you may also have medications ordered by different doctors. This can lead to mix-ups and medication mistakes may occur when you have many prescriptions.

RECOMMENDATION

As a safety measure, ask to schedule a "brown bag check-up" with your prescribing doctor or pharmacist. A brown bag check-up is when you gather all of your current medications and over-the-counter products (including herbal products or "natural products") into a brown bag and show them to your doctor or pharmacist so he/she can look for any potential problems.

TIP

Schedule your brown bag appointment in advance so the doctor or pharmacist plans enough time for the visit. A good rule is to have a single doctor "in charge" or aware of all the medications and products you take.

IN THE PHARMACY...

PROBLEM

Mistakes can sometimes happen when your doctor orders a new medicine or when there is a change in the dose of a drug you have been taking. This may happen because some drug names may sound-alike (when the prescriber calls in the prescription) or look-alike (when the pharmacist reads handwritten prescriptions or picks the incorrect drug from the shelf).

RECOMMENDATION

When your doctor gives you a prescription for a new medicine, ask him/her to write the reason why you are taking the medicine right on the prescription. This will help the pharmacist give you the right medicine.

TIP

Even if you are busy or feel embarrassed, use the pharmacy's confidential counseling service whenever you pick up new prescriptions or there is a change in your medications. When the clerk hands you your medication, ask to speak with the pharmacist. You need to make sure that the instructions on the label are the same as your doctor wrote on the prescription. Check the name of the medication, the condition it treats, the dosing instructions (how often you take it), and the number of times your prescription may be refilled. If something doesn't seem right, ask your pharmacist to telephone your doctor. Never leave the pharmacy if you have questions about your medications or are unsure of how to take them.

PROBLEM

Dosing mistakes with liquid medicines can happen if you do not use the measuring device that came with the medicine or one that is right for that medicine. If you use a medicine cup from another medicine, it may be a different size or have different markings that could cause you to take the wrong amount of medicine. When a teaspoon is ordered it means 5 mL, but since not all household teaspoons are the same size you could be taking either too much or too little.

RECOMMENDATION

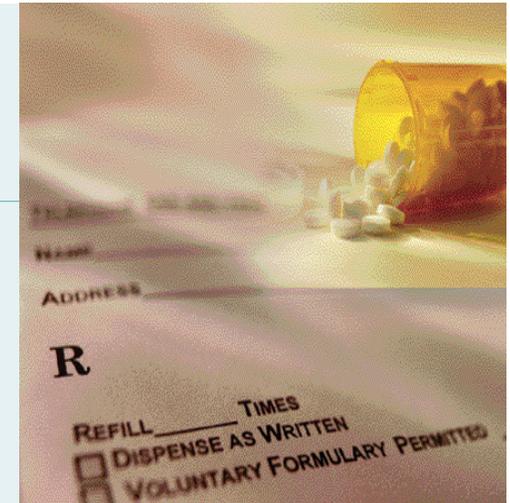
When you take or give liquid medicines only use the measuring device such as a dropper that comes with the medicine. If you get a liquid medicine from the pharmacy and it does not come with a measuring device, ask the pharmacist if he/she can give you a special oral syringe or tell you what device you should buy to measure the medicine.

TIP

With many medicines, and especially for children and older people, it is very important that the exact dose of the medicine be given. Ask your pharmacist to show you how to properly use the measuring device for the dose and to what marking you should fill the device. Make sure you understand before you leave the pharmacy.

PROBLEM

Medication safety problems (such as getting two prescriptions for the same drug and taking two drugs together that cause a bad side effect) can sometimes happen when you use more than one pharmacy to dispense your prescriptions. For example, your family doctor may write a prescription for Coumadin (brand name) to prevent blood clots and your specialist may order the drug by its generic name, warfarin. If you fill them at different pharmacies, both pharmacists would dispense the prescription. Other problems occur when you have prescriptions for two different medications filled at two different pharmacies. For example, your gynecologist gives you a prescription for birth control pills and your primary care physician gives you a prescription for antibiotics. In this case, neither pharmacist will be able to tell you that your birth control pills may not work while you are taking antibiotics.



RECOMMENDATION

If you use more than one pharmacy to get your prescriptions, you should pick a primary pharmacy just like you choose a primary doctor. The primary pharmacy should keep an up-to-date personal medication record for you. This should include a complete list of all the medicines you are taking, including over-the-counter medications such as aspirin, herbals as well as your current and past medical conditions. The primary pharmacy should continually review your profile to check for duplications of therapy and drug interactions. If you take a lot of drugs it is well worth paying a pharmacist to look over all your medications for any problems in your care.

TIP

You should always know the brand and generic names of your medicines. Ask your doctor to tell you both names and make sure both drug names (generic and brand) are clearly written on your medicine container.

KEY QUESTIONS FOR YOUR DOCTOR, PHARMACIST OR NURSE ABOUT YOUR MEDICINES:

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What are the brand and generic names of my medicines?

What does my medicine look like?

What am I taking my medicine for?

How much of my medicine should I take, and how often should I take it (daily, twice a day, three times a day, etc.)?

What time of the day should I take this medicine (morning, noon, evening, bedtime)?

Should I take my medicine with meals or on an empty stomach?

Do I need to avoid dairy products or fruit juices while taking this medicine?

How long will I need to take this medicine?

If I start to feel better can I stop or take less of the medication?

What are the side effects of this medicine, and what should I do if they happen?

What should I do if I miss a dose?

Does this medicine interact with my other medicines (herbals, vitamins, etc.) or with food?

Does this medicine replace anything else I am taking?

Where and how do I store my medicine?

What should I do with any left over medicine?

TIP

Take these questions to your doctor and/or pharmacist. Write the answers down on a piece of paper and make sure you understand all of the answers. Do not be afraid to ask them to repeat any information that you do not fully understand.

