

AgePage

Medicines: Use Them Safely

When Jerry, age 71, came home from the drug store with his latest prescription, he placed all his pill bottles on the kitchen counter and counted them. “I take five different medications, and you take four,” 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 us 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, liquids, creams, or sprays they take as “medicine,” and other people call them “drugs.” Both words can mean:

- ◆ Medicines you get from a pharmacy with a doctor’s prescription
- ◆ Pills, liquids, or creams you buy without a prescription to use now and then, for example, for aches and pains, colds, or heartburn
- ◆ 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.

At Your Doctor’s Office

If you’ve gone to your doctor because you don’t feel well, the doctor might decide a medicine will help and will write a prescription. Be sure you:

- ◆ 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.

Questions To Ask Your Doctor About A New Medicine

- ◆ What is the name of the medicine, and why am I taking it?
- ◆ How many times a day should I take it? At what times? 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 with food or without? Is there anything I should not eat or drink 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?

- ◆ Understand how to take the medicine before you start using it. Ask questions. It might help to write down the answers.

Ask Your Pharmacist

Your pharmacist is an important part of your healthcare team. If you have questions about your medicine after you leave the doctor’s office, the pharmacist can answer many of them. For example, a pharmacist can tell you how and when to take your medicine, whether a drug may change how another medicine you are taking works, 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 drop off your prescription.

When you have a prescription filled:

- ◆ 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.
- ◆ 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.
- ◆ Ask about special instructions on where to store a medicine. For example, should it be kept in the refrigerator or in a dry place?

- ◆ Check the label on your medicine before leaving the pharmacy. It should have your name on it and the directions given by your doctor. If it doesn't, don't take it, and talk with the pharmacist.

Now, It's Your Turn

Your doctor has prescribed a medication. The pharmacist has filled the prescription. 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, including over-the-counter products and dietary supplements. Show it to all of 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

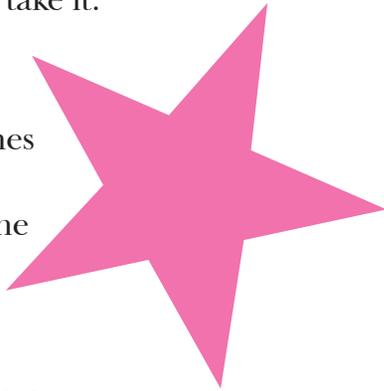
Generic Or Brand Name?

When getting a prescription filled, sometimes you can choose between either a generic or brand-name drug. Generic and brand-name medicines are alike because they act the same way in the body. They contain the same active ingredients—the part of the medicine that makes it work. A generic drug is the same as a brand-name drug in dosage, safety, strength, quality, the way it works, the way it is taken, and the way it should be used. Generic drugs usually cost less.

If you want a generic drug, ask your healthcare provider if that's a choice. Not all drugs are available in the generic form, and there might be medical reasons your doctor prefers the brand-name medicine.

medicine, doctor who prescribed it, reason it was prescribed, amount you take, and time(s) you take it.

- ◆ Read and save in one place 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 it might be doing more harm than good. Your doctor may be able to change your prescription 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. Find 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. Your pharmacist can probably tell you how to safely get rid of medicine you no longer need or that is out of date. The pharmacist might be able to dispose of it for you.
- ◆ Make sure you store all medicines and supplements out of sight and out of reach of children. And don't take your medicines in front of young children. They might try to copy you.

Shopping For Medicines Online

Medicines can cost a lot. If you have a drug plan through your insurance, you can probably save money by ordering yours from them rather than at your neighborhood pharmacy. Or, you might be thinking about buying yours on the

Medicare Prescription Drug Plans

Medicare has prescription drug plans for people with Medicare to help save money on medicines. For information please call 1-800-633-4227 (1-800-MEDICARE) or visit the Medicare website at www.medicare.gov.

Internet. But how can you tell which websites are safe and reliable? The Food and Drug Administration (see For More Information) has more information on buying medicines and medical products online.

What About Over-The-Counter Medicines?

Many of the ideas in this *AgePage* are also true for over-the-counter (OTC) drugs, like medicines to relieve coughs, cold, allergies, pain, and heartburn. Be careful when taking an OTC drug. For example, don't take a cough and cold product if you only have a runny nose and no cough. And, check with your doctor before taking aspirin if you are on a blood-thinning medicine,

because aspirin also slows blood clotting. Other things to remember:

- ◆ Measure the dose of a liquid OTC medicine as carefully as you would a prescription drug. Use a measuring spoon, since spoons you eat with vary in size.
- ◆ Be careful—OTC medicines can have side effects.
- ◆ Take the amount suggested on the label. If you don't get better, see your doctor.
- ◆ Read the label—even if you have used the OTC product in the past. Important information can change.

Remember, medicines—whether prescription or over-the-counter—can hurt you if they aren't used the right way. Learn to be a smart consumer of medicine.

For More Information

Here are some helpful resources:

Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality

540 Gaither Road
Rockville, MD 20850
1-301-427-1104
www.ahrq.gov

**Centers for Medicare and
Medicaid Services**

7500 Security Boulevard
Baltimore, MD 21244-1850
1-800-633-4227
(1-800-MEDICARE/toll-free)
www.medicare.gov

Food and Drug Administration

10903 New Hampshire Avenue
Silver Spring, MD 20993
1-888-463-6332 (toll-free)
www.fda.gov

**Partnership for Prescription
Assistance**

1-888-477-2669 (toll-free)
www.pparx.org

For more information on health and
aging, contact:

**National Institute on Aging
Information Center**

P.O. Box 8057
Gaithersburg, MD 20898-8057
1-800-222-2225 (toll-free)
1-800-222-4225 (TTY/toll-free)
www.nia.nih.gov
www.nia.nih.gov/Espanol

To sign up for regular email alerts
about new publications and other
information from the NIA, go to
www.nia.nih.gov/health.

Visit *www.nihseniorhealth.gov*, a senior-
friendly website from the National
Institute on Aging and the National
Library of Medicine. This website has
health and wellness information for
older adults. Special features make it
simple to use. For example, you can
click on a button to have the text read
out loud or to make the type larger.



National Institute on Aging

National Institutes of Health
U.S. Department of Health &
Human Services

May 2009
Reprinted July 2011

