

Safe Medication Use

Charity A. Metz, Pharm. D.

Regulatory Affairs Associate, New Drugs, Mylan Pharmaceuticals Inc.

Safe medication use requires us to be aware. We have to ask questions so we understand how to use medications properly. It is especially important to keep track of drugs we take continually and make sure we take them on time. For a persistent condition, such as high blood pressure or diabetes, these medications are a key to maintaining good health. Be alert for slight changes that may be a sign of an unwanted side effect. Protect yourself against drug interactions by making sure your doctor and pharmacist know all medications you are taking, including those prescribed by other doctors, over-the-counter (nonprescription) drugs, and herbal or home remedies. This topic will help you know what you can do at the doctor's office, the pharmacy, the hospital, and your home to use medications safely.

The doctor's office

- Make a list of all of your medications. Take the list with you each time you go to your doctor's office. This is especially important if you see more than one doctor. Your doctor might not know that you are taking medications another doctor has prescribed for you.
- Keep a list of problems you are having with your medications so you can discuss them with your doctor at your next visit.
- Ask your doctor to tell you what is written on your prescription, especially the drug name and how often you should take it. Then once your prescription is filled at the pharmacy, you can check the label to make sure it is the same as what the doctor told you.
- Ask your doctor why you are taking this medication. When a prescription is unclear, you can help the pharmacist double-check the prescription by knowing why you are taking the medication.
- If you get samples from your doctor, make sure that your doctor checks for interactions with your other medications. At the pharmacy, a pharmacist checks for drug interactions and allergies. There are also computers to double-check the pharmacist. When you get samples from your doctor, these important checks can be overlooked.
- Make sure you understand how to take a new prescription before you leave the doctor's office. Your pharmacist can also answer questions about how you should take your medications and what to do if side effects occur.

The pharmacy

Have you ever wondered what goes on in that 20-minute wait at the pharmacy?

- The pharmacist checks the prescription to make sure it is clear and complete and that no important information is left out. In some cases, the pharmacist may need to speak with your doctor.
- A member of the pharmacy staff enters your prescription in the computer.
- Information about all the medications you are taking now and have taken in the past, along with your allergies, are stored in the computer. Your history is checked for drug interactions, allergies, and duplicate therapy.
- A pharmacist checks to make sure the drug has an appropriate dosage and number of doses for you.
- The pharmacy staff also works with your insurance company.
- The pharmacy staff puts your medication in a bottle with a label.
- A pharmacist double-checks the label and medication inside the bottle against the original prescription. Warning stickers are placed on the bottle to let you know key precautions about your medication.
- Your pharmacist can tell you important facts about your medication. It is your job to make sure you understand how to take your medication, what to expect, and what to do if you have a problem. This is also a good time to ask the pharmacist any questions you may have.

The hospital

- If you know you are going to be in the hospital, you or a family member/friend should take your medications and a list of your medications with you.
- Once your doctor knows what you are taking and how you are taking it, your medications should be sent home.
- Bring a list of medications that you cannot take (due to allergies, etc). Tell why you cannot take the medication. Show the list to your doctor and nurses.
- Ask how you can speak to a hospital pharmacist if you have a problem with your medications.
- When you are given medications in the hospital, ask what you are being given and why you need the medication. If you are given something different, you should ask questions.

- If you are too sick to ask questions, have a family member or friend ask for you.
- Your hospital ID bracelet should be checked each time you are given a medication.
- Remind doctors, nurses, technicians, and other hospital staff about your allergies before you have any procedure or test.
- Before leaving the hospital, you should ask a doctor, nurse, or pharmacist to go over what medications you should be taking at home. Add any new medications to your list at home and be sure to delete medications you are no longer using. If you wonder whether you should restart a home medication, ask before you leave the hospital.
- Ask for written information to take home with you about your medications.

The home

- Write down any food, medication, or other allergies that you have on your medication list.
- Write everything you take, including over-the-counter (nonprescription) medications, vitamins, herbal products, and home remedies, on your medication list.
- Keep medications in their original containers. This prevents look-alike pills from being mixed up. This does not mean you cannot use weekly reminder containers. Ask your pharmacist what containers are appropriate as weekly reminders.
- Never take anyone else's medication. Other's medications may interact with your medications, or you may be allergic to the medication. A medication that helps someone else may not help you. Often, taking medication that is not your own can be harmful.
- Read the label to be sure you are following the directions. Sometimes the directions on a medication may change after a doctor's visit, a prescription renewal, or a hospital stay.
- Always follow the directions on your label unless your doctor or pharmacist tells you otherwise.
- Do not take medications in the dark. You might not be getting the right medication.
- Do not store medications in the bathroom or in direct sunlight. Heat, moisture, and light can destroy or change medications. The bathroom medicine cabinet is one of the worst places to store medications. Most medications should be kept at room temperature in a dry, dark place.
- Do not keep people medication with pet medication or other household products.
- Avoid storing your toothpaste with creams or ointments. When you are in a rush or lighting is poor, a cream or ointment tube can be confused easily with the toothpaste.
- Never take medications that are discolored, smell unusual, or seem strange in some other way.

- Keep medications out of the reach of children.
- Always get rid of expired medications. An expired drug may hurt more than help you.
- Flush all old medications including used patches down the toilet.
- Never break, chew, or crush medications unless you were told to do so by your doctor or pharmacist. Many medications are made to work over time; by changing them, you can receive either an overdose or an underdose of the medication.
- Use proper measuring devices. The household tablespoon does not give you a true tablespoonful of medication. Ask your pharmacist to supply an accurate measure for you to use.
- Do not stop taking medicine your doctor told you to finish just because you feel better.
- Always ask your doctor or pharmacist before taking any new over-the-counter medications, vitamins, herbal products, or home remedies. Interactions can occur with your prescription medications and/or your health conditions.
- Keep the following list of telephone numbers by the phone for emergencies:
 - Doctor
 - Pharmacist/Pharmacy
 - Poison Control Center
 - Hospital/Emergency Squad
 - Police
 - Fire Department

Questions you should be able to answer

1. What is the name of my medication?
2. Is my drug a generic? Does it come in generic?
3. What is the medication supposed to do?
4. How long should I take the medication?
5. When is the best time to take this medication?
6. Does this medication replace any of my other medications?
7. Are there any activities, other medications, foods, or beverages I should avoid?
8. What kind of side effects might I expect?
9. How should I store my medication?
10. What do I do if I forget to take my medication?
11. What does my medication look like?

Develop a relationship with your pharmacist. He or she is a great source of information for these and other questions about your medications. Pharmacists are trained to answer your medication questions. They are never too busy to help you, so be sure to ask your questions.

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