

Safe Medication Use

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As medications become more complicated and stronger than ever, medication errors are inherent in the hospital, the pharmacy, and the home. Your role as a group leader is to teach others what they can do to help prevent medication errors. By knowing what questions to ask, patients can better understand their own treatments and can play an active role in their own health care. The goals are for patients to know:

- what they can do to prevent medication errors in the doctor's office, the pharmacy, the hospital, and the home
- where and how to store medications
- how to choose over-the-counter (nonprescription) medications and herbal products

Background

Nearly two-thirds of Americans over the age of 65 years of age use medications daily. Their medications account for 25 percent of the nation's drug costs (1). Approximately 80 percent of those over 65 years have confusing multidrug regimens. Americans, as a whole, take more than 50 billion over-the-counter pain-relieving tablets yearly to treat headaches, muscle aches, and arthritis. Studies have shown that less than 30 percent of Americans use their medications correctly (2). A recent survey showed almost half of all consumers do not always read product labels, less than 40 percent talk with pharmacists, and one-third are unaware of the risks sometimes related to the use of medications (3).

The doctor's office

First, choose a doctor you feel comfortable talking with about your health and medications. It is okay to ask questions and to expect answers you can understand. To help you better understand what your doctor is saying, you may want to take a friend or relative with you. Call and ask for test results; do not assume they are "fine" just because you have not heard anything from your doctor's office.

Make a list to take with you to each doctor visit.

Your list should contain the following:

- The name of all of your prescription medications; strength; dosage form such as capsule, tablet, or ointment; how often you take them; how long you have been taking them; and the name of your physician.

- All of the over-the-counter medications, vitamins, herbal products, and home remedies you are using—why you are using them, how often you are using them, and how long you have been using them
- Medications that you cannot take and why you cannot take them
- Foods or other products you cannot have or use and why
- Any problems you are having with your medications or your health to discuss with your doctor (This is also helpful to do before you visit the pharmacy.)

The pharmacy

Choosing a pharmacist is as important as choosing a doctor. Pharmacy education takes a minimum of five years college education to complete, and many pharmacists have six years or more of college education. Pharmacists know the most about medications and their uses. Counseling you on your medication is one of the most important roles of a pharmacist. Taking your prescriptions to only one pharmacy keeps all medications records in one place, thus reducing the risk of taking duplicate medications or having a harmful drug interaction. In addition, "certified" pharmacy technicians have extra testing to help them provide as much assistance as possible to the pharmacist.

As a patient, you have the right to counseling by your pharmacist. The Health Care Financing Administration (HCFA) states that all pharmacists or their technicians/interns must offer counseling on all prescription medications to Medicaid patients. In addition, the pharmacist must offer to review the patient's medication usage. Furthermore, mail-order pharmacies must have a toll-free telephone service that patients can call with their questions. In some states, it is a law that pharmacists or their technicians/interns offer to counsel all patients on their prescription medications.

If you are new to the pharmacy, you need to provide the pharmacist or pharmacy staff with the following information:

- the correct spelling of your name
- your address, telephone number, and date of birth
- a list of other medications (including prescriptions received from other pharmacies), over-the-counter (nonprescription) medications, vitamins, herbal products, and home remedies you are taking

- any allergies or serious illnesses you might have
- any problems you have had taking medications in the past
- whether you would like a childproof or an “easy open” cap
- whether you prefer a generic drug
- whether your insurance covers prescriptions.

This information should help your prescription be filled more safely and quickly. It is good to always go to the same pharmacy each time so that all of your records are at one place.

Over-the-counter (nonprescription) medications

An over-the-counter product is any medication that you can buy at the pharmacy, grocery store, or other stores without a prescription.

- Look for how the product is tamper-proof. Make sure the package is intact.
- Even if you have used the medication often, make sure the product has not changed ingredients since you last used it.
- Check the use of the medication.
- Make sure you are not someone who should not be taking the medication. If you are unsure, ask your pharmacist or doctor.
- See how you should take the medication.
- Determine how long you should take the medication and when you should contact your doctor.
- Know the possible side effects.
- Find out the expiration date.

Herbal Products

We have all heard the advertisements claiming that a product is “natural,” so you should use it. We know that herbal products have been used for centuries in other countries. Although we do not think of herbal products as “drugs,” they can affect the body just the same. In some ways, herbal products may be more harmful than helpful. The U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) does not approve these products, so these products do not have to undergo any testing processes that medications do to prove they are safe and effective. They can vary in strength from company to company or even tablet to tablet. If you do decide that you want to use an herbal product, keep the following in mind:

- Herbal products can interact with your other medications. You should always let your doctor and pharmacist know if you are using an herbal product. If you are taking a “blood thinner” or have cancer, HIV, or other life-threatening conditions, you must let your doctor and pharmacist know what herbals you are using. Write these products on your medication list. If you are unsure about the exact

contents of a product you are using, take the product with you when you visit your doctor or the pharmacy.

- Do not take an herbal product for a condition for which you are taking a prescription medication without first speaking with your doctor and pharmacist.
- Even though herbal products are “natural,” that does not mean they are “safe.” Tell your doctor or pharmacist about any problems you have with the product.
- Follow the directions on the label as you would with any other medication. If there are no directions on the label, do not choose that product.
- Choose only products that give the name and address of the manufacturer. A telephone number also should be listed in case you have a question.
- Look for the expiration date. If there is no expiration date, do not buy the product. If the expiration date is one year or less, do not buy the product.
- The FDA requires herbal products to have the following statement after any claims of effect on the body: **“This statement has not been evaluated by the Food and Drug Administration. This product is not intended to diagnose, treat, cure, or prevent any disease.”**
- Store herbal products as you would any other medications away from light, heat, moisture, and oxygen. Keep herbal products out of the reach of children and pets.
- Do not give children herbal products without talking with the child’s pediatrician.
- Do not take herbal products if you are pregnant, trying to become pregnant, or nursing.
- Buy only herbal products from companies you know and trust. Ask your pharmacist about the different products.
- Think to yourself-Does this sound too good to be true? Well, often it is.
- Do not drink alcohol with herbal products until you know it is safe.
- Know what side effects you might expect before you start taking any herbal product. The bottle label should tell you if the product is not safe for use by people who have chronic health problems or are pregnant.
- Do not use herbal products to replace a balanced diet, exercise, and plenty of rest.

Smart antibiotic use

Antibiotic resistance is becoming a common problem, especially for those patients who use antibiotics often. Here are some ideas to keep in mind to get the best use out of your antibiotics:

- Use antibiotics only if you have a bacterial infection. You may have a “cold,” but that does not always mean you need an antibiotic. Your doctor can do tests to see if you have a bacterial infection or a viral infection. Antibiotics do not work on viral infections.
- Ask your doctor or pharmacist what side effects you might expect from an antibiotic. Some of the most common ones are an upset stomach, diarrhea, sun sensitivity, and dizziness. If you develop a rash, hives, or swelling or have trouble breathing, contact your doctor or pharmacist or go to the emergency room immediately. You may be having an allergic reaction.
- Ask if your antibiotic is affected by foods or other medications.
- Do not stop taking medicine your doctor told you to finish just because you feel better. If you do not finish the whole prescription, you allow hard-to-kill bacteria to continue growing, which can cause resistance problems.
- Do not take antibiotics that are someone else’s or are leftover from another time when you were sick.
- Get a vaccination to have some protection from infections. Vaccinations are especially important for children, adults over 65 years of age, and those with serious health problems.
- If you know you have an allergy to an antibiotic, be sure to let your doctor know. This may prevent similar antibiotics from being prescribed for you.

The hospital

For you to be treated appropriately, your doctor needs to know all medications you are taking—not just prescription medications, but also the over-the-counter products, herbals, and home remedies and, more important, why you are taking them. Take a list of all of your medications with you to the doctor’s office if you can. You should let your doctor know if you have had any problems with foods, drugs, or other products. You should explain these problems in detail. For instance, a drug may give most people an upset stomach, but if the drug also causes you to develop a rash and to be short of breath, it is important for your doctor to know. If your doctor can determine you have a “true” allergy to a medication, he or she will not prescribe other medications like the one you had problems with.

If you should take your own medications to the hospital, never take any of them without first talking with a nurse or your doctor. Your hospital medications may not be the same as your home medications. In fact,

your home medications may react badly with your hospital medications. In most cases, it is best to send your home medications home after your doctor knows what you were taking at home.

All of the information you provide should be written in your chart. Your chart is normally kept outside your door or in the nurse’s station. Although the chart belongs to the hospital, it has your information. You should know what it says. It usually contains information on your health history, lab results, list of medications and times given, your treatment plan, diet restrictions (e.g., low salt), tests/procedures, and surgical notes. If you think there may be a problem or an error in how you are getting your medication, ask your doctor or a nurse to show you your chart and explain it to you.

If you are given a new medication, ask questions. The medication may be a generic of what you take at home or a new medication. You have the right to know why you are receiving a medication and what you should expect. If you feel your questions are not being answered or you still do not understand, ask to see a hospital pharmacist. If you are not well enough to ask questions, have a friend or family member do so on your behalf.

The home

Showers and baths create heat and moisture that can cause some drugs to degrade rapidly. Storing your medications poorly for only a day can cause certain medications to break down. If you simply carry a tablet in your pocket, your body’s temperature can alter your medication. You should never store medications in the glove compartment of your automobile. Certain medications are more sensitive to heat, light, moisture, or oxygen than other medications. As some medications break down, they might not dissolve properly, so your body cannot use them. It depends on each medication. The best way to store medications is in a cool, dark, dry place such as the top shelf of a closet. You should keep your medications out of the reach of children in a locked container if possible. At least once a year, sort through your medicine cabinet and any other place you store medications. Get rid of out-of-date products, damaged containers, and old supplies. Keep everything in the original containers so that no one takes the wrong medication. Of course, reminder containers are an exception.

Reminder Containers

Although reminder containers are good at helping you to keep track of your medicines, it's always a good idea to ask your pharmacist if the container you're planning to use will be appropriate. Tell your pharmacist which medications you would like to store in the container. Your pharmacist can help you choose a container based on your medications' sensitivities to heat, light, moisture, and oxygen. Most pharmacies have many reminder containers such as those with sections marked for meals and bedtime. Some of these are also marked with Braille for the sight-impaired.

In the medicine cabinet

- Adhesive bandages
- Adhesive tape
- Gauze pads
- Tweezers
- Thermometer
- Accurate measuring spoon
- Alcohol wipes
- Disinfectant

Items to keep on hand

You should check with your doctor or pharmacist before taking any over-the-counter medications to make sure there will not be any food-drug, and drug-drug interactions.

- Antacid to help with upset stomach (Maalox[®], Tums[®])
- Antibiotic cream to reduce chance of infection (Neosporin[®])
- Antihistamine to relieve allergy symptoms (Benadryl[®])
- Antiseptic to stop infections (Betadine[®])
- Decongestant to relieve stuffy nose and other cold symptoms (Sudafed[®])
- Fever reducer (Tylenol[®])
- Hydrocortisone to relieve itching and inflammation (Cortaid[®])
- Pain reliever (Motrin[®], Tylenol[®])
- Syrup of ipecac to induce vomiting

Resources

- Food and Drug Administration:
FDA Consumer Magazine
Mail orders: Superintendent of Documents
P.O. Box 371954
Pittsburgh, PA 15250-7954
Phone orders: 202-512-1800 (7:30am to 4:30pm EST),
FAX: 202-512-2250
Internet: <http://www.fda.gov/fdac/default.htm>
Main FDA Phone Number (for general inquiries):
Toll-free 1-888-INFO-FDA (1-888-463-6332)
- **The Pharmacist's Guide to Your Medications**
By the American Society of Health
System Pharmacists
Available at bookstores nationwide
ISBN 1585280054
- **USPDI Volume II: Advice for the Patient[®]**
Drug Information in Lay Language
Hardcover. ISBN 1563633329
Phone orders: 1-800-877-6209
Internet: <http://www.medecbookstore.com/>

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