

# Use Medicines Safely



Medicines can cure an illness, reduce the risk of sickness, or help you cope with a long-term disease. But they can also cause serious problems if you take them incorrectly. Mistakes with medicines happen when people don't understand why, how, and when to take them.

There are two kinds of medicines: those you buy over the counter without seeing a doctor and those a doctor must prescribe. Both kinds can be strong. Find out about any medicine before you take it.

## Inform Your Doctor and Pharmacist

Always talk to your doctor and pharmacist about your medicines. This information will help them treat you:

### Tell them...

- If you are allergic to any medications or have had an unusual reaction to any medication, food, or other substance.
- If you are taking any other medications, including over-the-counter, herbal substances, vitamins, and minerals.
- If you are pregnant, think you might be pregnant, or you are planning to become pregnant.
- If you are breastfeeding.
- If you are following a special diet.
- If you have problems taking any medications.
- If you have any other medical problems besides the one(s) for which this medication is prescribed (Why? Because of possible drug interactions and possible side effects).

## Ask Questions

Your doctor, nurse, and pharmacist are responsible for helping you understand prescription medicines well enough to take them safely. But you are responsible for learning what you need to know about any medication you will take or will give to a family member. Find out this information before you leave the health clinic or pharmacy by asking as many questions as you need to. If their answers are vague or you still don't understand, find a professional who can help answer them.

### Ask your doctor and pharmacist these questions about your medicines:

- What is the name of the medicine, and how will it help me?
- How soon can I expect it to work?
- Is there another treatment for my problem instead of a medicine?
- What will happen if I don't take this medicine?
- How do I take this medicine—with food or on an empty stomach?

- How often do I take it (how many times a day) and for how long?
- What foods, drinks, other medicines, or activities should I avoid while taking this medicine?
- Are there any side effects, and what do I do if they occur?

## Report Reactions

Report to your doctor how the medicine is working. Some medicines may cause problems, even if you take them the right way. Call the doctor if you think any medicine is making you feel worse. Report any new symptoms to your doctor. If you develop a rash or shortness of breath while taking a medicine, especially an antibiotic, do not take the next dose until you have talked with a doctor.

Ask questions to find out what effect foods and other medicines might have on a new medicine. Some foods and drinks can make the medicine work too fast or too slowly or even not at all. Other foods and medicines may cause a life-threatening reaction. Alcohol can be very dangerous when taken with some medicines.

Here are some examples of medications and foods that react with each other:

- MAO inhibitors\* and aged or fermented foods
- Tetracycline and milk products
- Natural licorice and high blood pressure medicines
- Coumadin and liver or green, leafy vegetables (foods containing Vitamin K).

Regular use of medicines such as mineral oil, diuretics or water pills, birth control pills, and antacids can cause nutritional deficiencies over a period of time. Your doctor needs to know you are taking these medicines so imbalances can be detected.

*\*MAO inhibitors, commonly called MAOIs, are a type of antidepressant used to treat some types of mental depression. Not all antidepressants are MAO inhibitors.*

## Avoid Common Mistakes

If you don't understand the answers your doctor and pharmacist give you, ask them to explain again. Get written information or take notes. More people over age 65 are admitted to the hospital for medicine problems than for any other reason. And those under age 65 have some of the same problems. Studies have shown that half of all prescriptions are taken incorrectly.

Here is some advice for taking medications safely:

- Keep a list of all your medications and their dosages.
- Some medications require you to wear a medical identification bracelet, such as insulin and Coumadin (a blood thinner). It is important to do so in case of a medical emergency.
- Take your medications exactly as they are prescribed by your doctor, including the number of times per day and for the length of time indicated (for instance, 10 or 14 days).
- Do not stop taking your medications without discussing it with your doctor. Stopping your medications early can result in unsuccessful treatment or make it more difficult to treat in the future.
- Follow the label instructions as far as taking the medication with food or on an empty stomach. Read the precautions carefully.
- Ask the pharmacist or doctor if there are any foods to avoid while you are on the medication, including alcohol.
- If you are taking the medication with water, make sure you drink a full 8 ounces of water and not just a few sips. Some medications are extremely irritating to the throat, esophagus, and stomach.
- Do not take a double dose of the medication.
- If you experience any unusual side effects, contact your doctor immediately.
- Do not share your medication with others.
- Check with your pharmacist or doctor regarding any possible drug interactions.

## Sunburn and Sun Sensitivity

Many drugs can increase your risk of sunburn when you are exposed to sunlight or to a sun lamp. If you take a drug with a precaution of sun sensitivity, follow these guidelines:

- Avoid prolonged periods in the sun, even with a sun umbrella.
- Protect your skin with clothing, and wear a hat.
- Use sunscreen with a sun protection factor (SPF) of 15 or higher on all exposed areas, and apply it often.

## Travel Guidelines

Keep your medications in their original containers with you in your carry-on luggage, in case your plane is delayed or your luggage is lost. Also, in case of an unexpected change in travel plans, take extra medications with you.

## Remember These Lifesavers

You and your doctor together make the best decisions about medicines. Some of these discussions can be real lifesavers! Here are some lifesaving guidelines:

- Take all of your medicines or a list of them to your doctor and pharmacist for review every time you visit the clinic or pharmacy.
- Report regularly to your doctor the effects of the medicines you take.
- Don't take any medicine unless you are sure it is necessary.
- Assume any new symptom you develop after starting a new medicine is caused by the medicine.
- When a specialist wants you to start a new medicine, get your primary doctor's okay.

## Take Safety Precautions

Keep safety precautions in mind when buying, using, and storing medicines. Take the opportunity to teach children about using medicines safely.

- When you buy medicine, check it at the store to make sure no one else has opened it.
- Check to see if the medicine looks normal and like what you expected. If you think it looks old or does not look like you expected, ask the pharmacist to double check it. You might ask, "Is this Capoten for high blood pressure?"
- Never take anyone else's prescription medicine, and flush any unused medicine down the toilet.
- Keep all medications out of reach of children—locked up, if possible. Very often, grandparents' homes are the place where children are poisoned with medicines. Post the number of the regional poison control center next to the phone, and keep ipecac syrup (to induce vomiting) on hand for use if advised.
- Teach all children about medicine, and call it "medicine," not "candy" or "drugs." Explain that medicine can help make them well if they are sick but can be very dangerous, like poison, if taken the wrong way. Talk about the difference between medicine and illegal drugs.

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