

Using Medications Safely

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According to a recent analysis on prescription drug use, the more physicians seen by a patient over the age of 65, the greater the number of prescriptions the patients fills which increases the risk for dangerous medication errors. The report stated that seniors receiving medications from two different physicians filled an average of 27 prescriptions in a year and were at risk of 10 potential prescription drug errors. If the patient was seeing five physicians, the number of prescriptions filled in a year increased to 42, and the number of potential drug errors increased 60% to 16. The more doctors involved in a patient's treatment, the risk for errors also increased. The study showed that patients over the age of 65 had a drug error rate almost 7 times greater than their younger counterparts.

Nearly two thirds of all physician visits result in a prescription, and 40% of office visits involve therapy with two or more drugs. This can quickly lead to the use of many medications known as polypharmacy. Let us look at why medications are used in the first place.

When medications are prescribed, the intent is to improve quality of life by curing a disease, reducing or eliminating the symptoms of a disease, arresting or slowing a disease process or preventing a disease or its symptoms from appearing in the first place. Unfortunately, medication can be a two-edged sword. The same medication that helps one person may harm another. Even when medications are taken as intended medication related problems can still occur. In fact, some are severe enough to cause disability and even death. This is especially true in the senior population. In fact, medication related problems add more than \$100 billion to the nation's health care bill.

It has been said the most expensive medication is the medication that does not work. How can you avoid medication related problems and get the most out of your medications?

Be sure to keep a list of all medications that you take. This list should include herbal and natural products, vitamins, over the counter and prescription medications. Share this information with your pharmacist and physician anytime a new medication is started. Keep your list up to date. Note any medication and food allergies on this list and be sure to mention these anytime a medication is recommended. You should share your medication list with all of your healthcare providers-chiropractors, physical therapists, dentists and others. Believe it or not, over the counter medications can be very similar to prescription medications and herbal supplements and vitamins can interact with your medications.

Make sure you know why the medication was prescribed. Before you leave the doctor's office, make sure you know the name of your new medication and why it is being prescribed. Ask if the medication replaces a medication that you have been taking or if you need to change the way some of your other medications are being taken. Take notes at your doctor's appointment. This will help you remember what your doctor told you regarding your new medication and what he or she is treating.

Ask your doctor if a non-medication alternative is available to treat your condition. Although we sometimes think of a pill as a quick fix to our problems, sometimes we can use other measures. One example is diet and exercise to decrease blood pressure or improve our cholesterol. Sometimes we can make lifestyle changes that may decrease the doses of the medications we take.

Make sure you can read and understand the directions on your prescription bottle. Make sure you understand the colored warning stickers on your medication containers. If the label is hard to read ask if larger type is available. If the directions are confusing, have the pharmacist clarify the directions. Does 4 times a day mean 4 doses during 24 hours or 4 times during the daytime? What does “as needed” mean? If the medication is being used on an as needed basis, make sure you understand what the medication will treat. Is the medication for pain, upset stomach, headache or another ailment?

Ask your pharmacist what side effects to expect, what you should do if you have a problem, when you should stop taking your medicine, what to do if you forget to take your medicine, what is the best time to take the medicine, and how to store your medication properly. If you have difficulty opening your medication bottles, ask for an easy open container.

Tell your doctor and pharmacist if you have difficulty swallowing pills. There may be a liquid form available. Do not chew, break or crush medications without first finding out if the drug will still work. If you are using a liquid medication, ask your pharmacist how to best measure the liquid to make sure you are getting the proper amount of medication.

More is not better. Follow the directions on the prescription label or the medication package. Just because one pill works well, it does not mean that two will work better. Don't share medications with others although their diagnosis or symptoms may be similar to yours. We are all individuals and our medication regimens should be individualized to our specific needs.

Communication is key. Ask questions and communicate with your healthcare professionals. Don't be afraid to ask questions and participate in your own medical care.



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