

MEDICATION SAFETY

Safe Use & Disposal

Part 3 of a Series

Lack of knowledge about what medications a person is taking can lead to safety problems that range from minor annoyances, injury, major complications or death. Risks to medication safety include aging and age-related changes (physical, sensory and cognitive), and bad habits related to managing medications. Each of these factors pose a threat to older adults' safety when taking medicine. In combination, these factors could seriously threaten health, well-being and life.

Helpful hints

The following are helpful hints to assist people in keeping in mind "Safety First" when managing medications.

- **Know the purpose and follow the directions.** Read labels and information that comes with your prescriptions or over-the-counter (OTC) drugs or supplements. Make sure to understand the purpose of each medication, guidelines (e.g., refrigerate, don't leave in an extremely hot or cold place, don't operate machinery until the effects are known), dosage and when to take.
- **Keep an up-to-date list of all medications.** Write down all current medications, supplements, herbs, vitamins, and other OTC substances. Useful forms are available for download from the FDA and the AARP.
- **Share your list with ALL health care professionals.** This list should be taken to all appointments with a health care professional (e.g., office visit, hospital visit – outpatient or inpatient) It is important for a prescriber to know exactly what substances you are taking before prescribing a new medication or changing medications. Doing so can help the prescriber address and avoid potential interaction issues. Specific recommendations from the FDA 1 include:
 - Ask one prescriber to keep track of all your medicines and make sure you tell the prescriber if you are taking over-the-counter preparations, vitamins, and/or herbal remedies.
 - If you have more than one condition that needs medications, ask your prescriber if there is ONE drug that treats both. (e.g. some blood pressure medicines treats migraines)

- Write down any side effects or other reactions, even if you believe it's not drug related, and tell your prescriber. Ask if there's another medicine that may be better for you
- **Ask questions.** Whenever a new medication is prescribed or purchased ask the health care provider AND the pharmacist about possible interactions and side effects. As the saying goes "Better safe than sorry." Don't hesitate or be afraid to ask questions about anything (e.g., medical conditions, health, generics, cost) and about any type of medication (e.g., prescriptions, over-the-counter, supplements (e.g., vitamins, minerals), and herbal remedies). Talk to your medicine prescriber or a pharmacist. To help understand your medications and take them safely you might ask the following questions:
 - What does this drug do? When do I take the drug? How often (frequency)? How long (duration)?
 - Are blood tests needed? The following drugs are commonly monitored by follow-up and blood testing: "Blood thinners (e.g., Warfarin, Coumadin), Diabetes meds (e.g., insulin), Seizure meds (e.g., phenytoin, carbamazepine), Heart meds (e.g., digoxin)" 2
 - Can I take it with food? Any food I shouldn't eat?
 - Is it safe to drink alcohol such as beer, wine, whiskey, while I'm taking this drug?
 - What should I do if I forget to take it?
 - What are common side effects?
 - Where should I keep this drug? How do I know if it's working?
- **Immediately address side effects.** Immediately notify someone of concerns and take appropriate action. Something viewed as minor could become a major concern. For example:
 - If there is swelling of the tongue or throat or difficulty breathing, it could become life-threatening and 9-1-1 should be called immediately.
 - If a person becomes dizzy or has blurred vision, a severe or long-last headache or drowsiness, or excessive vomiting, contact your health care provider immediately.
 - The following are common side effects that tend to be more of an aggravation but could pose a serious problem if not managed: constipation, upset stomach, diarrhea, skin rash, mood changes, and more. All side effects should be reported.
- **Keep your health care appointments.** Follow-up appointment and testing can help ensure medication safety and provide opportunities to learn more about your medicines and whether or not they are producing the desired result.
- **Ask About Senior Friendly Options.** Ask your pharmacy about larger print labels on medications, easy twist off caps (without child safety feature), etc.
- **Plan a medicine "check-up" annually (or more often if needed).** Monitor medications, how they are stored and that pills are not unexpectedly disappearing. In addition, properly dispose of medications that are expired. Talk to your

medication prescriber or a pharmacist and discuss all the prescribed medications and other substances you are taking like vitamins, supplements, or herbal remedies. This action will keep people informed about current medications and reduce the potential for taking substances that may no longer be necessary, safe or effective. The safest way to avoid adverse drug reactions and side effects is to avoid medications! However, when it is necessary to take medicine, practice Safe Medicating.

Safe Disposal of Medications

Did you know that medications flushed down the toilet or poured into the sink are compromising the safety of others and adulterating the environment? Disposed medications are entering water systems. The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) does not set limits on the amount of drugs that are safe to enter in our water systems. The EPAS is “uncertain” about the effects on people or aquatic life or risks posed by drugs entering the water stream and what risks are posed to people or water animals. But it is important to act responsibly and use “safety first” as a guide anytime handling medications.

Responsible Disposal

In order to safeguard others and protect the environment, it is important to dispose of medications safely.

- Do not flush or pour medicines down the drain
- Discard unused medicines in the trash.
- Protect others by placing the medicines in a plastic bag that can be sealed.
- Crush pills and capsules placed in the plastic bag, add water to dissolve it. Add something to the plastic bag that will pollute the medicine such as kitty litter, coffee grounds, saw dust, or wood shavings so that pets or people will not be tempted to ingest it.
- After sealing the bag, put it in the trash.
- Ask about hazardous waste collection in the community that could be used to dispose of unused medicines. Check to see if unused medicines could be returned to the drug store.
- Talk to your pharmacist about safe disposal options available for unused medicines.

Published January 2010. Last reviewed July 2011.

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The Center for Aging with Dignity offers the Medication Safety Series as a community service. We are devoted to keeping people "SAFE After 60" by advocating for and advancing best-practice programs on the safety and mistreatment of older people. (MS1-July '11) Copyright © 2006-2011 Charles Puchta – University of Cincinnati. DISCLAIMER – This publication is designed to raise health awareness and is not intended to replace the advice of health care professionals.