

Avoiding Overmedication and Harmful Drug Reactions

As you grow older, you are more likely to develop long-term health conditions that require taking multiple medications. Many older people also take over-the-counter (OTC) medications, vitamins, or supplements. As a result, older adults have a higher risk of overmedication and unwanted drug reactions (adverse drug events).

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), adverse drug events result in over 700,000 visits to hospital emergency rooms each year. Many adverse drug events can be prevented.

To lower the chances of overmedication and drug reactions, the American Geriatrics Society's Health in Aging Foundation recommends the following tips for safe use of medications.

If you care for someone who needs help managing their medications, these steps can help prevent overmedication and related problems.

ASK BEFORE TAKING AN OTC

Even though a prescription is not needed for over-the-counter medications (OTCs), some can cause serious side effects in seniors. Some OTC medications—like ibuprofen and naproxen—have different names but belong to the same drug type or category. Taking both drugs at the same time is the same as taking a double dose, and could cause problems. Also, OTC drugs and supplements may interact with your prescription medications. For these reasons, you should always check with your healthcare provider or pharmacist before taking any OTC drug or supplement.

MAKE A LIST

Make a list of all the medications you take, their doses, and how often you take them. Be sure to include in the list any OTC drugs, vitamins, supplements or herbal or other remedies. Share this list with all of your healthcare providers and caregivers. You should keep a copy too. Take the list with you to each medical appointment, and carry the list with you at all times, in case of a medical emergency.

UPDATE YOUR LIST

Remember to add any new drug(s) or dose(s) to your list when a change is made. Make sure to alert your entire team of healthcare providers (physicians, physicians assistants, nurses, and pharmacists) if there has been a change to your daily regimen of medications or OTCs.

REVIEW AND REVISE YOUR MEDICATIONS

Once or twice a year, ask your primary healthcare provider to review your list of medications, supplements, and vitamins. Ask whether you still need to take each one at its current dose. Your provider may want to stop some of your medications.

ASK QUESTIONS

Whenever a healthcare provider prescribes a new medication or a change in the dose, ask why. (If, for example, your provider prescribes a new medication to ease the side effects of a drug you're already taking, ask if it makes sense to continue taking the drug that is causing the side effect.) Ask your provider or pharmacist to check any new medications in a drug interaction computer database, especially if you're already taking five or more drugs. Also ask:

- When and how you should take any new drug
- What is the purpose of the drug
- What you should do if you miss a dose
- Whether the drug might interact with other drugs, vitamins or supplements you're taking
- If a generic or lower-cost brand name medication is available
- What side effects or warning signs of a drug interaction you should watch for.

READ PRESCRIPTION LABELS

Check the prescription label and look in the bottle to make sure the pharmacist has given you the right amount, of the right drug, at the right dose. Your pharmacist can put large print labels on your medications if you have vision problems.

FOLLOW DIRECTIONS

Take your medications exactly as directed by your healthcare providers. Be sure you understand how, when, and for how long you should take the medication. Try to have all your prescriptions filled at the same pharmacy, so they get to know you and the pharmacist is aware of all the different medications you are taking. Most pharmacies use computer systems that alert the pharmacist of possible drug interactions. Also, let your pharmacist know about any past allergic reactions you have had to medications.

REPORT PROBLEMS

If you begin to have new health problems after starting a new medication, you may be having a reaction to the drug. If so, tell your healthcare provider right away. If you have a serious reaction, such as difficulty breathing or swelling in your throat, call 911 and go to the emergency room immediately.

MEDICATION DOs AND DON'Ts

- Do throw away medication if the expiration date has passed
- Do make a list of your medications and know what each one is for
- Do ask questions
- Do be sure to keep your prescriptions filled so you don't run out
- Do use a pillbox to help you remember when to take your medications
- Don't take medicine that is not prescribed for you
- Don't use medication that has passed its expiration date
- Don't stop taking medication just because you feel better

Please be mindful that it is not safe to drink alcohol when you take medicine for sleep, pain, anxiety, or depression.



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