

# Medicines Made Easy

A close-up photograph of an elderly person's hand holding a small, round, yellow pill between the thumb and index finger. The skin on the hand is wrinkled and aged. The background is a soft, out-of-focus purple and blue gradient.

Conversation is the Best Medicine

Things  
you need  
to know  
about  
managing  
your medicines  
but were  
afraid to ask.

## I. MEDICINES AND YOU

Drugs can help us live better and longer. But they can also cause problems. Some drug-related problems are small, like an unpleasant side effect that goes away quickly. Other problems are more complicated, like a new prescription that interferes with a drug or a nutritional supplement that your doctor or medical professional may not know you are taking. Other serious drug-related problems can lead to hospitalization, or worse. You are in the best position to avoid drug-related problems. Becoming your own medication manager—in partnership with your doctor and your pharmacist—has never been more important. This is the best way to help ensure that you use prescription drugs safely, and that they're as effective as possible.

### CHECK OUT THESE FACTS:

- The average 75-year-old has three chronic conditions and uses five prescription drugs.<sup>1</sup>
- Nearly one in four older adults age 65+ skips doses of medication or does not fill prescriptions because of cost, and suffers worse health as a result.<sup>2</sup>
- Approximately 1.5 million Americans suffer preventable illness, injury or death each year because of mistakes made in prescribing, dispensing and taking prescription drugs.<sup>3</sup>

1. "The State of Health and Aging in America," Merck Institute of Aging and Health and Centers for Disease Control, 2004.
2. "Seniors and Prescription Drugs." Kaiser Family Foundation, 2002.
3. "Millions in U.S. Take Medications Incorrectly." The National Academies, 2007.

Taking the right number of medications, at the right dosage, for your condition is the safest and healthiest thing to do. Take time with your doctor to be sure that you are taking just the right number of medications, in the right doses for your health condition(s). Be sure to have a medicine review at least once a year. Gather every prescription drug, over-the-counter drug, and supplement that you take. Help someone you care for do the same.

This guide includes helpful information and resources for you, and the people you care about, to ask the right questions of your health professionals, explore your medication choices, and manage your medications for safety, effectiveness, and cost.

*Note: The word "doctor" is used as a general term to represent the medical professional who a consumer or patient goes to for medical health care or services. The words "prescription drugs," "prescriptions," "drugs," and "medications" and "medicines" all refer to drugs that you receive through a prescription from a medical professional. The words "medication" and "medicine" refer to either prescription or non-prescription drugs.*

Take responsibility for your health. Ask yourself and your doctor, **"Is there something else I can do before going on this medication?"**

Adjusting your habits—like improving your diet, getting more exercise, or reducing your stress—may reduce your need for medication.





## II. DOCTOR'S ORDERS: KEEP A PERSONAL MEDICATION RECORD

The best way to track your medications and help your doctor and pharmacist know about all the medicines you are taking is to create a medication list, or what we call a “personal medication record.” A personal medication record enables you to list all of the medications that you take, including over-the-counter medicine and dietary supplements. Include the following information on your list:

- your name and contact details
- the names and phone numbers of your doctors
- the names and phone numbers of a person to contact in case of an emergency
- your pharmacy contact information, including hours
- the name of your medication(s), reason for use, form (e.g., pill, liquid, injection), dose
- start and stop date for each medication

Make copies of your personal medication record. Give one to your doctor, your pharmacist, and a loved one. Keep a copy with you, one in your car, and one at home. Use the record included here. You can also download copies from [www.aarp.org/medicationrecord](http://www.aarp.org/medicationrecord) or order from 1-888-OUR-AARP, stock number D18358.

**If you can take just one simple step for yourself and people you care for, start by completing your personal medication record.**

**My Personal Medication Record**

► **My Personal Information**  
 Name: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Date of Birth: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Phone Number: \_\_\_\_\_

► **Emergency Contact**  
 Name: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Relationship & Phone Number: \_\_\_\_\_

► **Primary Care Physician**  
 Name: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Phone Number: \_\_\_\_\_

► **Pharmacy/Drugstore**  
 Pharmacist: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Phone Number: \_\_\_\_\_

► **Other Physicians**  
 Name: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Specialty: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Phone number: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Name: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Specialty: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Phone number: \_\_\_\_\_

► **My Allergies**  
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 \_\_\_\_\_

**How to use this Guide:**

- Use this record to keep track of your medications, including prescription drugs, over-the-counter (OTC) drugs, herbal supplements, and vitamins.
- Share the information with your doctors and pharmacists at all visits.
- Keep it always with you.
- Use a pencil.

**You should review this record when:**

- Starting or stopping a new medicine.
- Changing a dose.
- Visiting your doctor or pharmacist.

**Last updated:** \_\_\_\_ / \_\_\_\_ / \_\_\_\_

► **My Medical Conditions**  
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AARP      As cooperation with the SCS Rx Coalition      ©1999 AARP

## III. SPEAK UP! ASK QUESTIONS.

When you receive a prescription for a new medication, you need a lot more than just the medicine. You need information. Ask questions to learn how the prescribed medicine may affect you. Start with these:

1. What is the name of this medication? What does it do? What are the side effects?
2. When do I start and stop taking this medication? How do I take this medicine? How should I store it?
3. At what time do I take this medicine? Should I take this medicine before meals, after meals, with meals, or on an empty stomach?
4. Will this medication work safely with the other medications I am taking?
5. Can I do anything instead of, or along with, taking my medicine to help my symptoms?
6. Is there another medicine I can use to treat my condition at lower cost? If so, does it work as well and is it safe?
7. Why is this the right medicine for my condition, age and gender?

8. When will I stop taking it, or will I take it forever? What should I do if I feel better?
9. Should I avoid certain foods, alcohol, dietary supplements or driving while taking this medication?
10. What should I do if I forget to take my medicine?

**Take your questions with you and be sure to get the answers. Write down what you learn.**

If you're helping someone else, ask about prescription “cascading.” Sometimes, a doctor adds a new medicine to treat the side effects of another one. Instead, ask if the doctor or medical professional can stop, adjust, or replace the first drug. To help someone prepare for their doctor visit: always arrange to go with them to the next visit. Get answers to these questions before you go:

- What differences have you noticed after starting this drug?
- When and how often have you been taking it?
- What is the hardest thing about taking it?

## IV. MANAGE YOUR MEDICINES

Being a good medication manager is possible—for all of us.

Use these five tips and take charge of your medications.

### 1. Remember to take your medicines.

Research shows that we change our behavior in a cycle. The cycle goes from stage to stage: thinking about a new behavior we want to do, getting ready, acting, and keeping it up. If you stop anywhere along this cycle, don't worry! Go back to a previous stage.

Here are some memory tricks when you get a new medication:

- Repeat the instructions multiple times.
- Use lists, calendars, pillboxes, or write notes to yourself.
- Make a mental picture of yourself taking the medicine. Visualize your new habit.
- Connect something with taking your medication such as meals.

### 2. Take your meds exactly as you've been instructed.

Is there an instruction you don't understand? If so, speak up. Get clear direction from your doctor or pharmacist. Remember, tell your doctor the truth about what you are and aren't taking. Together you can make medication adjustments that are best for your health and safety.

**Notify your doctor immediately if you have any problems or concerns with your medicines or if you can't stick to your medication plan because of cost, side effects, or other reasons.**

### 3. Monitor how your drugs are working.

It's important to pay attention to how you feel while taking your medication. If you feel any difference, note any changes and write them down. Then remember to tell your doctor and pharmacist.

If you are on a blood thinner or a drug for a specific condition such as high blood pressure or cholesterol, you may need to take blood tests or other monitoring tests, to see how your medication is working. Monitoring tests can help reduce or avoid dangerous side effects. If you are seeing more than one doctor, be sure to let each one know the result of each monitoring test that you take. Write down and remember the numbers from your test, such as your INR (International Normalized Ratio), blood pressure or cholesterol numbers.



### 4. Beware of side effects—interactions from food, alcohol, over-the-counter drugs and dietary supplements—and the interaction of drugs with driving.

The more medicine we take, the more we may experience drug-drug interactions or side effects that can be harmful. Medications can also interact with what we eat or drink. For example, many drugs, even over-the-counter drugs and herbal supplements, can interact dangerously with alcohol. Even a small amount of beer, wine, or liquor can affect how a drug works.

Herbal products and other natural medicines should be considered drugs that can cause side effects and may interact with each other or with traditional medicines. The Food and Drug Administration does not test herbal products, so there is no guarantee of the exact strength of the ingredients.

If you take a drug that makes you feel a little woozy, you should adjust or limit your driving to stay safe. In fact, you shouldn't drive until you know what effects your new medication has on your body.

## Avoid dangerous drug interactions or side effects:

- Ask your doctor or pharmacist for a checkup of all the medicines you take.
- Follow directions on how to take prescription and over-the-counter pills.
- Eat a consistent and nutritious diet with a variety of foods.
- Read all warning labels on your medicines.

### 5. Store your medications safely.

#### Dispose safely too.

The bathroom “medicine cabinet” is the worst place to store your medicines, despite its popular name. Storing your medicine in the bathroom, which gets hot and damp, can affect your drugs’ chemical composition. It is much safer to store medicine in a dark, cool, dry place, such as a kitchen cabinet. Refrigerate drugs only when the label tells you to.

If your medicine has passed the expiration date, looks discolored, crumbles, changes color, or smells, it is time to dispose it. When discarding

unused medications, ensure you protect children and pets from potentially negative effects.

One option is to take your medicines to a community drug disposal, solid waste or pharmaceutical take-back program. Another safe option is to put your expired medicine into a sealable plastic bag. If it is solid (pill, liquid capsule, etc.), crush it or add water to dissolve it. Add coffee grounds or kitty litter—something that can mix with the medicine to be less appealing for pets and children. Seal the plastic bag and dispose in the trash. Remove and destroy all the information on your prescription label from the containers before recycling them or throwing them away.

Finally, consult your pharmacist with any questions.

**DO NOT FLUSH unused or expired medications and DO NOT POUR them down a sink or drain.**

## V. WANT TO SAVE MONEY? EXPLORE YOUR MEDICATION OPTIONS.

Exploring your medication choices can save you money while improving your health.

Consider these three simple actions to lower your costs:

### 1. Compare your drug choices and consider generics.

The price of prescription drugs continues to rise. In fact, during the past six years, prescription drug costs have increased triple the rate of inflation. But don’t get discouraged. There are ways you can save money. You may find less expensive medication options with generics or

by finding alternatives. The evidence-based approach has emerged as an important tool in assessing the real value of medicines. It offers doctors unbiased comparative information. The same information is now available to consumers through AARP’s website [www.aarp.org/comparedrugs](http://www.aarp.org/comparedrugs). AARP’s drug comparison site, which showcases content from Consumer Reports Health–Best Buy Drugs, provides unbiased information about comparable brand name and generic drugs, and price comparisons. You can also order print drug comparison reports by health condition online at [www.aarp.org/healthorderform](http://www.aarp.org/healthorderform).



## 2. Use AARP's doughnut hole calculator.

AARP has developed a calculator at [www.aarp.org/doughnuthole](http://www.aarp.org/doughnuthole) that helps people on Medicare save on drug costs and avoid the doughnut hole, the coverage gap where people have to pay all the costs of their prescription drugs. But you don't even have to be on Medicare to see what options you may have to save money. The calculator helps you find less expensive, therapeutically similar drugs. Using the calculator, you can print a doctor's letter for each medication alternative.

## 3. Find discounts.

Just like shopping for food, you can shop for medication discounts. Use these tips:

- Consider a prescription discount card.
- Fill your prescription online or through mail order.
- Consider the new Medicare prescription drug benefit program. Visit [www.aarp.org/medicarerx](http://www.aarp.org/medicarerx).
- Check with your state or local government for prescription assistance programs.

## VI. A PRESCRIPTION FOR HEALTH: USE MEDICATIONS WISELY

Remember that all medicine, whether a prescription drug, herbal or dietary supplement or over-the-counter medication, requires caution. Becoming your own medication manager—in partnership with your doctor and pharmacist—is the best way to ensure that you use prescription drugs safely, and that they are as effective as possible.

### REMEMBER WHEN TALKING TO YOUR DOCTOR OR PHARMACIST, ALWAYS:

- Share the names of all your medicines.
- Ask about any possible side effects.
- Question if there are any alternatives.



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Visit [www.aarp.org/healthorderform](http://www.aarp.org/healthorderform)

For more information, visit [www.aarp.org/usingmeds](http://www.aarp.org/usingmeds)

Call 1-888-OUR-AARP (1-888-687-2277)

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