Conversation is the Best Medicine

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

Look inside for your personal medication record!

AARP SM
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Acknowledgements
AARP would like to thank and acknowledge the following contributors:
Susan Roche, writer consultant
Staff from AARP Health Promotion, PPI, Brand Management and Editorial Management

Photography
Paul Fetters (page 5)
Piper Gottschalk (pages 1, 12, 25 and 31)
Blake Little (page 15)
Cade Martin (page 26)
I. INTRODUCTION

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 ensure that you use prescription drugs safely, and that they’re as effective as possible.

There’s a lot you can do—for yourself or for someone in your family.

You have the power...

...to ask questions

...to make wise choices

...to track your medications.

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” all refer to drugs that you receive through a prescription from a medical professional. The word “medicines” refers to either prescription or non-prescription drugs.
Why pay more attention to your prescription drugs? Why learn more now about managing medications?

First of all, the number of drugs out there has exploded. Doctors can choose from many more prescription drugs today than even ten years ago.

The number of older people using prescription drugs has also exploded. Three-fourths of people 45 or older take prescription drugs. And they take an average of four prescription medications each day. The older you get, the more likely you are to take more than four daily prescriptions.

Your doctor and your pharmacist need you on their team. Here’s why:

- Older people vary more among themselves than younger people. It’s impossible to generalize about us. We’re the first to know if we don’t feel right after taking a drug. So we can tell our doctor or medical professional how we usually react to drugs.

- Medical students don’t receive much education on older people and medications. According to the Gerontological Society, most health care professionals do not receive the geriatrics training necessary to respond to the unique and complex health needs of older adults. Doing some research on our own can help!

- Before they go on the market, new drugs undergo limited testing on people age 65 and older. Those studies rarely involve older people who were using other drugs, too. Therefore, the drugs may work differently when you use them.

- Also, our bodies change as they age. Some of those changes can affect how we absorb or digest drugs. Asking questions about this can help push our doctor to adjust a drug dosage.

- Many patients don’t know about the possible risks, side effects, or possibly dangerous interactions of the prescription drugs they’re taking. If your doctor doesn’t offer to tell you, ask. The more you know, the safer you’ll be.
II. BEFORE YOU SEE THE DOCTOR

You have a doctor’s appointment. Your best move is to update your medications list or make one if you don’t have a list of all your medicines, and plan to ask questions. Let these tips help you prepare for your visit:

1. **Ask for extra time when you make your appointment.**
   One of the best things you can do is ask for drug-consultation time when you make your appointment. Explain that you need extra time to discuss your prescriptions. Then, when you check in, tell the receptionist that you’ve asked for extra time for a drug consultation.

2. **Practice how to manage your visit.**
   At the beginning of the visit, say that you’d like to reserve at least five minutes to talk about your medicines. Then be ready to use the extra time well:
   - Think in terms of newspaper headlines to save time. Be brief.
   - Use words like “excuse me” to get your doctor’s attention. You can also put your hand up while you talk. This emphasizes your need to slow down.
   - Consider bringing a loved one or friend with you. They can be another pair of ears at your appointment.

3. **Plan for how you’ll feel.**
   No matter what, most of us feel nervous when we visit our doctor. Tension can make us forget our questions. But it can also help us pay more attention.
   Try not to waste energy telling yourself to feel another way. Whatever you’re feeling at the doctor’s is fine. Just use that feeling to make your visit go your way.

4. **Be courageous! Tell your doctor the whole truth about all of your medicines.**
   Many health studies have asked medical professionals and their patients to each list what medicines the patient is taking. About 9 times out of 10, they don’t agree!
It is important for you to tell your doctor the truth about all the medicines you take—prescription, over-the-counter, or herbal—to avoid any health risks.

So, be honest. You can start with something like “This is hard to admit” or “This is embarrassing.” Saying one of those can actually increase your courage. Then take a deep breath and keep going. Your safety is worth it.

5. Prepare a list of all medications you’re taking. Share the names of all your medicines. Write your list now. And take it everywhere.

The best way to track your medications and help your doctor and pharmacist is to create a personal medication record. This is a list of all the medicines, including over the counter drugs and herbal supplements, that you take, the doses, and how you take them. You can use the personal medication record in this guide.

Be sure to include the following information:

> Your personal information, name and contact information.
> Your doctors’ names and contact information.
> Your emergency contact information.
> The name of your medicines, reason for use, form (e.g., pill, liquid, injection), use, dose, and start and stop dates for each medicine.

Tips to get the most out of your personal medication record:

> Make copies.
   Give one to your doctor, one to your pharmacist, one to a loved one.
   Carry one with you and keep a copy at home.

> Keep it updated.
   Note if you are taking new medicines or going off medicines.
   Record any drug allergies, side effects, or sensitivities you have.

When it comes to your health, conversation is the best medicine. There are no “stupid” questions.
III. AT THE DOCTOR’S

When it comes to your health, conversation is the best medicine. There are no “stupid” questions. There’s also no limit to how many questions you can have. You have the right and responsibility to ask any questions about how medications may affect you and your life. This is not the time to be shy or quiet. Yes, doctors and medical professionals are busy, but they can, and will, take time to answer your questions.

Plan for your visit and leave with the information that you need. Consider these tips:

> Think about your questions.
> Write them down and bring them with you.
> Be ready to ask them, even if you have to ask your doctor or medical professional more than once to explain the answer.
> Share the names of all your medicines—everything you take.
> Ask about any possible side effects of the drugs you are taking.
> Question if there are any alternatives.

You may have new or different questions at each doctor’s appointment. Take this question list to your doctor. Fill it out together. Then, take your list to your pharmacist. Your doctor can answer many of these questions, but probably not all of them. Pharmacists have special training to give you the medication details you need.
Questions about Your Medication
Get answers about each medication that your doctor prescribes for you.

YOUR NAME

DOCTOR’S NAME

NAME OF MEDICATION

DATE

1. What is the name of this medication? What is it supposed to do? What are the side effects?

2. When do I start and stop taking this medication? How do I take this medicine?

3. Will this medication work safely with the other medications I am taking?

4. Can non-drug actions help my symptoms, in addition to, or instead of, this drug therapy?

5. Are there other medications that I can use? How do they compare in safety, effectiveness and price?
Additional Questions

Take a look at the detailed questions on the next few pages. They may give you an idea of other questions you may want to ask.

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Ask your doctor or medical professional to write on your prescription form:

> the reason for your medication, and
> the brand and generic names of your medication.

This helps the pharmacist double check that you receive the correct medicine.
**Detailed Questions**

Sticking with five main questions is a good place to start. You may have many more questions. Consider choosing some questions from this detailed list.

**Why?**

Why is this the right medicine for me?

Is there another kind of treatment I could try first, before taking a medication?

If this is a brand-new drug, is there an older drug—with a longer history of working well—to treat my condition?

Is there a medicine with fewer side effects?

Is there a medicine that could be better for someone of my age? My gender? My race?

Is there a different dosage that could be better for my age? My gender? My race?

Is it OK to start out with a very low dose and see how that works?

Does a generic drug exist? If so, is the generic version OK for me to take?

Here is my personal medication record; it lists everything I take. Please look this over. Is it still OK to take each of these while I take this new medicine?
Is there a cheaper drug that would work just as well?

Is there a drug that could work better for me, even if it's not on my drug plan's approved list, or formulary? Can you request that drug for me?

**What?**
What will show me that the medicine is working? When will that be?

What do I have to do, to find out if the medication is working?

What blood tests will I need while on this medicine?

What other tests will I need?

If tests will be needed, what baseline test do I take now?

**When?**
When do I begin this medicine?

When will I stop taking it? Or will I take it forever? What should I do if I feel better?
When do I take it? Every day? How many times a day? When during the day?

If I miss a dose, when do I make it up, or take the next dose?

What if I run out?

How many refills do I have?

**How?**
How do I take this medicine? With or without food or drink?

How long before eating or after eating do I take it?

Is it OK to take this drug at the same time as other medicines?

Can you adjust the instructions for all my medications, so I can take them all on the same schedule?

How do I store this medicine? In the refrigerator? Somewhere else?

If I have trouble swallowing, can I split the pill or crush it into food?
Should I avoid any vitamins or over-the-counter drugs while I’m taking this drug?

Should I avoid any food? Any drink?

Should I avoid any activities? What about driving?

What side effects are likely? What side effects are more likely in people my age who take this drug?

How do I know if what I experience while taking this drug is dangerous?

What should I do if I experience side effects? Who should I call if I have a problem?

What’s the most important caution I should keep in mind while taking this drug?

Where?
Where can I get printed information to read about this medicine—written for consumers? Can you give me a brochure?
Can you ask the pharmacy to print out the label for my medication in very large type?

Where on the Internet should I look for more information about this drug?

Where can I get information on prescription assistance programs to help me afford my medicines?

If I buy a medicine from an online pharmacy, what should I look for to make sure the pharmacy is legitimate? What online pharmacies do you trust?
IV. AT THE PHARMACY

What is a pharmacist, anyhow?
No one knows more about a broad range of prescription drugs and other medications than your pharmacist. Pharmacists study all the aspects of prescription drug therapy, with an emphasis on safe patient care. The Doctor of Pharmacy (PharmD) degree requires at least two years of college followed by four years of professional pharmacy study. To keep their licenses, pharmacists must take several new courses every year to every two years, depending on the state they are licensed in. Some pharmacists take extra training to specialize in such areas as geriatric pharmacy.

Do you talk with your pharmacist?
Pharmacists are more likely than your doctor to have the detailed answers you want about your medications. You may be surprised at the services your pharmacist can provide. In most states, only your doctor or medical professional, physician assistant, or nurse practitioner can actually prescribe a medication. But your pharmacist can suggest helpful prescription changes to your doctor or medical professional.

The more you can work in a trio—you, your doctor and your pharmacist—the more you will benefit from your medications.

Pharmacists are more likely than your doctor to have the detailed answers you want about your medications. You may be surprised at the services your pharmacist can provide.

Partnering with your pharmacist
Here’s what to do:

> You can go to any pharmacist you want. Some health insurance plans make it more economical to use certain pharmacies. Do everything you can to pick a pharmacy where you can fill all your prescriptions. Select your non-prescription medications at the same pharmacy.

> Go to the pharmacy in person. Try to choose a time when they’re not likely to be busy.

> Look for a sign showing where you can talk with the pharmacist. The sign may say “Pharmacist Consultation” or “Patient Counseling.”

> When you pick up your prescription, the pharmacy staff may ask you to sign a statement about your privacy rights. There is often an electronic pen to sign with. By signing, you may also be certifying that you (1) received your prescription, and (2) declined the phar-
Your pharmacist should check the list of all the medications on your patient profile to help you avoid dangerous interactions.

> When someone comes to the patient counseling area, tell them, “I have a question for the pharmacist.” Only the pharmacist is qualified to counsel you. It may be a pharmacy technician or clerk who first greets you.

> Be prepared for some lack of privacy. To ensure that no one overhears you, you could bring a paper pad and pen. You can write private statements or questions there.

> Be prepared to wait for a few minutes. Most pharmacists will stop what they’re doing in order to talk with you. But there could be emergencies or other rush situations that just can't wait.

**What You Can Get From Your Pharmacist**

Your pharmacist has specialized resources to help you get the answers you need about your medications. Here are some examples:

> Drug interaction information.

> Printouts of your prescription drug spending, for your tax records.

> Official notices about drug recalls or other problems.

> Drug information reference books and websites to investigate a drug you’re wondering about.

Bring your questions, like those you’ve read in this guide, to your pharmacist. Here's how your pharmacist can help with your questions:

**What is the name of this medication and what is it supposed to do?**

*Your pharmacist should:*

> Check that the drug on your prescription is the right one for your condition, not another drug with a similar name.

> Make sure that this drug is not on a list of drugs that older people should never take.

> Ensure that the prescribed drug is not recalled or under investigation.

> Check the list of all the medications on your patient profile to help you avoid dangerous interactions. This check includes over-the-counter, non-prescription drugs that you take.
Call your doctor or medical professional to discuss any concerns, and to help set up monitoring tests that may be required while you use the drug.

**Why is this the right medicine for my condition, age, and gender?**

*Your pharmacist should:*

- Suggest a lower dosage to start with.
- Explain any new studies showing drugs that work more effectively for people of your age, race, or gender.
- Suggest a more proven, generic, or less expensive drug that could treat your condition as effectively, and with fewer side effects.
- Make sure that the prescribed drug and dosage will not interfere with any other drug, food, or vitamin you are taking.
- Contact your doctor to discuss possible changes to your prescription.

**When do I begin and stop taking this medicine?**

*Your pharmacist should:*

- Give and explain detailed written instructions for when to take this drug.
- Print out the label for the medication container with instructions in large type.
How do I take this medicine and what should I avoid and watch out for?

*Your pharmacist should:*

> Explain the reasons behind the drug use and storage instructions.
> Give you specific examples of possibly dangerous drug reactions to report—and how to report them.
> Explain the safest way to add another medication—prescription or over-the-counter—to what you already take.
> Contact your doctor to see if you can take all your prescription drugs at the same times each day.
> Schedule a medication review session at the pharmacy.

In a medication review, you bring in all the medications you've been taking. The pharmacist checks for duplicate medicines and possible drug-drug interactions. The pharmacist can recommend needed changes to your doctor.

The pharmacist may charge a small fee. But the review can result in your taking fewer medications. That may benefit your health and your pocketbook.

Some pharmacists now specialize in evaluating and monitoring patients’ drug treatment. They may have their own consulting practice and charge an hourly fee. If you want to hire a pharmacist like this, look for a Senior Care Pharmacist who is a member of the American Society of Consultant Pharmacists.

Where can I get more information about this medicine or about obtaining it at a lower cost?

*Your pharmacist should:*

> Tell you about special programs that help you pay for your drugs, and how to qualify and apply for them.
> Contact your doctor to suggest a less expensive drug that could be right for you.
V. MAKE WISE CHOICES AND LOWER THE COSTS OF YOUR MEDICATIONS

Exploring your medication choices can save you money while improving your health. Consider these three simple actions to lower your costs:

1. Consider Generic Drugs
Ask your doctor about generics. They can help you save money without compromising your health. Here are some important facts about using generic drugs:

- The FDA (U.S. Food and Drug Administration) approves generic drugs that meet the same quality and safety standards as their brand-name counterparts.
- Generic drugs frequently cost less than brand-name drugs. The price of generics is usually between one-fifth and one-half the cost of brand-name drugs.
- Generic drugs account for about 50% of all prescription medicines obtained in the U.S.
- A generic form exists for about half of the drugs on the market. If a generic does not exist, that usually means just one company has the patent to make the drug. When a drug patent expires, other companies can seek FDA approval to make the same drug.
- Generic drug manufacturers must demonstrate to the FDA that their generic drug is the bioequivalent to its brand name counterpart. They must have the same active ingredients, strength, dosage form, and method of administering. Sometimes there are minor differences such as flavoring or color.
- In every state, a law lets your pharmacist fill your prescription with a generic drug, unless your doctor specifically says that the brand-name drug is necessary.

To get the generic drug:
- Ask your doctor to write your prescription for a generic drug, if one is available.
- Unless your prescription has a check box marked,
“Dispense as written,” ask your pharmacist to fill your prescription with a generic drug.

If your doctor prescribes a brand-name drug, ask your pharmacist to call the doctor to suggest an effective generic drug instead.

2. Research Your Drug Choices

There is information based on research reviews of drugs that allow you to manage your health and using prescription drugs. This evidence-based approach is fast emerging as an important tool to assess the real value of medicines, what they do and what they cost.

For example, evidence shows no significant difference among drugs commonly used to treat urinary incontinence. But a monthly supply of drugs for this condition can cost anywhere from $23 to $175. With this evidence in hand, you can talk with your doctor or medical professional about which drug is best for you. You may benefit from a much less expensive medication.

Consult one of these free sources to compare drugs:

> **AARP’s Drug Research** [www.aarp.org/comparedrugs](http://www.aarp.org/comparedrugs)

AARP’s guide summarizes what current medical research says about effectiveness and safety of prescription drugs. Cost comparisons are presented in at-a-glance tables.

> **Consumer Reports Best Buy Drugs** [http://crbestbuydrugs.org](http://crbestbuydrugs.org)

For each condition, read the summary and recommendations page. It tells you which drug *Consumer Reports* recommends as a best buy, and why. You can link to a longer *Consumer Reports* document showing details on the drugs’ safety, effectiveness, and costs. New drug reports appear each month.

Just minutes of your time could save you money. Follow these three easy steps for prescription drug research:

1. **Read**: Go to AARP’s website: [www.aarp.org/comparedrugs](http://www.aarp.org/comparedrugs). Read the consumer friendly research about the drug(s) you are currently taking—write down the possible alternatives within each drug class.

2. **Compare**: Talk with your pharmacist or go online to compare effectiveness, safety, and price for the drugs on your list (be careful to use the same dosage for each drug).

3. **Consult**: No one should rely on drug research results without taking into consideration individual circumstances and medical history. That’s why AARP recommends that you read the material presented on the site, compare prices, and consult with your doctor,
pharmacist, or other medical provider before adding or changing medications.

3. Find Medication Discounts
Just like shopping for food or clothing, you can find medications at discounted prices. Here are some tips:

**Compare prices for the drugs you take.**
*Consumer Reports* magazine recently bought a month’s supply of the same five drugs from 130 different merchants. The difference between the lowest and highest prices was more than $100. It may be cheaper to buy different medications from different places. If you do this, be sure that one pharmacy keeps a list of every drug that you take. This is the best way to avoid dangerous interactions.

**Consider a prescription discount card.**
These cards are for anyone, not just those on Medicare. These cards are also different than prescription cards for those with low incomes. Typically, you buy the discount card for a few dollars. Or the card may be free with membership in the group offering the card. With most cards, you then pay about $20 per month and it gets you lower drug prices. But there are no guarantees. You may find equally low prices on your own.

**Consider filling prescriptions on your pharmacy’s website.**
Many community pharmacies have their own mail-order service or online pharmacy. Prices are often lower on the website than at the store.

**Compare drug prices at other online pharmacies.**
Legitimate Web-based pharmacies employ pharmacists who verify your prescription with your doctor. A licensed pharmacist promptly answers your email questions. And you can use the pharmacy’s online tool for checking drug interactions.

**If you use online pharmacies, be sure they carry the VIPPS seal.**
This approval from the National Association of Boards of Pharmacy stands for Verified Internet Pharmacy Practice Site. It shows you that the online pharmacy is legitimate. Getting a VIPPS seal is voluntary. Some online pharmacies may not have applied for certification.
Consider the new Medicare prescription drug benefit.
You have probably seen a lot of news about the new Medicare prescription drug benefit. This benefit will go into effect in two stages. The drug benefit is voluntary. You do not have to sign up. But there may be a penalty if you sign up later. For more information about Medicare Part D and the Medicare-approved drug discount cards, read The New Medicare Prescription Drug Coverage: What You Need to Know. To order a copy, call 1-888-OUR-AARP or visit www.aarp.org/medicarerx.

Get prescription assistance.
Did you know there are more than 300 programs to help low-income people pay for their prescription drugs? AARP suggests two methods for finding out if you qualify for one of these programs.

1. Take the BenefitsCheckUpRx at www.benefitscheckuprx.org.
   This is a fast, free, and confidential online questionnaire. It is very easy to use. You enter information about your prescriptions, income, and assets. The Check Up shows you the prescription assistance programs for which you may qualify. You learn how to enroll for each program.

   The Benefits Check Up can give the most help to people on Medicare without other prescription drug coverage, and who have low incomes.

   Did you know there are more than 300 programs to help low-income people pay for their prescription drugs?

   The National Council on the Aging chairs the coalition of nearly 100 organizations, including AARP, which runs the Check Up. Each member helps keeps the Check Up current, and publicizes it to reach as many low-income people as possible.

2. Look for prescription assistance in your own state, or with a specific pharmaceutical company.
   Search AARP’s state-by-state, plan-by-plan list of pharmacy assistance programs at www.aarp.org/bulletin/prescription/statebystate.html. Here’s what you’ll find:
   > Each state’s pharmacy assistance program and Medicaid health program.
   > Drug maker assistance programs from the manufacturers of most drugs commonly prescribed for older people. Many companies assist patients directly. Others work through your doctor or medical professional to provide medications.
   > Discount drug cards and discount pharmacies.
Use a mail-order or online pharmacy only if:

> You can easily find the pharmacy’s toll-free telephone number and street address.

> The pharmacy requires you to mail in your prescription, or requires your doctor or medical professional to fax it.

> You cannot obtain prescription drugs just by filling out a questionnaire.

> You can speak with or email a licensed pharmacist, at no charge, when you have questions about your medications.

How to handle online pharmacy problems:


> Complain to the FDA about a website that may be selling prescription drugs illegally: [www.fda.gov/oc/buyonline/buyonlineform.htm](http://www.fda.gov/oc/buyonline/buyonlineform.htm).

> If you get an email from an online pharmacy that might be promoting suspicious products, forward the email to the FDA at [webcomplaints@ora.fda.gov](mailto:webcomplaints@ora.fda.gov).

> Prescription benefits for military veterans, retirees, spouses, and survivors.

> A list of nearly 9,000 clinics and hospitals that participate in a special federal program with lower prescription drug costs.
VI. MANAGE YOUR MEDICINES

We already know we're supposed to follow our prescription instructions. But life does get complicated. We tend to forget or skip the steps we know we should take. And starting a new habit can be difficult.

But being a good medication manager is possible—for all of us. Use these six tips and take charge of your medications: Remember, take, monitor, avoid, notice, and store.

1. **REMEMBER to take your medicines.**
Use some memory tricks when you get a new medication:

> Right away, repeat the instructions to yourself five times—even ten. Whisper them. Say them out loud. Read them. Sing them.

> Make a mental picture of yourself taking the medicine. Focus on this picture all the way home from your visit. Take one minute when you get home to visualize your new habit. Do nothing else. Just stand or sit and see this mental picture.

> Think of something to connect with taking your medication. Some people call this a peg or a hook to hang your new habit on. It could be a rhyme (like “My med’s for me; take it times three”), an acronym (TIN-TIN, or “Take It Now”), or an image of a steaming bowl of soup (if you’ll take your medicine with food).

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. Chances are you’ll be more successful each time.
Some memory strategies use lists, calendars, pillboxes, or notes to yourself.

You may prefer an event-based memory strategy. It’s often easier to remember to take a medicine when it’s connected to a routine or to something that happens every day, such as meals.

2. **TAKE your meds in exactly the way you’ve been instructed.**

For your safety, follow all medication instructions. It’s likely that your doctor or pharmacist has customized your prescription drug’s dosage or schedule just for you. To avoid choking or gagging when taking a large pill, or one that disintegrates rapidly, be sure to take it with a full glass of water to wash it down thoroughly.

Is there an instruction you don’t understand? Something that contradicts what you’ve heard before? If so, speak up. Take charge by getting answers from your doctor or medical professional and pharmacist.

Also, you may have read reports about the need to modify prescription dosing for people of different ages or ethnic groups. In fact, the physiology of aging greatly affects how medicines work in our bodies. This is worth talking about with your doctor or medical professional. Make any prescription dosage or schedule changes only with your doctor or medical professional, not on your own.

What if you do experience a possible side effect or drug interaction?

> Call your doctor, medical professional, or pharmacist. If the situation seems life threatening, call 9-1-1.

> When you call, have your drug container, or the patient information leaflet, nearby. The person on the phone may ask you to refer to one of them.

> Try to jot down what you are experiencing, and at what time. What are your symptoms? How do you feel? What time were you experiencing these symptoms or feelings? When did you last take the medicine that you think caused the problems?
3. **MONITOR how your drugs are working.**
How do you know if your medications are working? There are ways that both you and your doctor or medical professional can monitor how well your meds are working.

> **Self-monitoring.** It's important to pay attention to how you feel. If you feel any differently while taking your medication, note the changes and write them down. Then remember to tell your doctor or medical professional and pharmacist. Also ask your doctor or medical professional when you should notice an improvement in your health or condition from taking the medication. Find out when to report back to the doctor or medical professional to discuss whether or not you have noticed an improvement.

If you monitor how your drugs are working, you will be better guarded from uncomfortable or unhealthy side effects.

> **Monitoring Tests.** If you are taking medications such as a blood thinner or one for a specific condition such as high blood pressure or high cholesterol, there are specific tests to monitor how your medications are working. You may need to take blood tests, or other tests, at certain times to keep an eye on how your medication is affecting your body. If so, be sure to keep each appointment. This is one of the best ways to reduce or avoid dangerous side effects.

If you are seeing more than one doctor or medical professional, be sure to let each one know the result of each monitoring test that you take. It's helpful for you to write down and remember the numbers from your test, such as your INR (International Normalized Ratio), blood pressure or cholesterol numbers. That coordination will help keep you safe.

4. **AVOID dangerous interactions.**
The more medicines we take, the more we might experience drug-drug interactions. Many older people take eight different prescription and over-the-counter medicines. That number could combine in about 250 ways! This is why it is so important to keep a personal medication record and share it with your doctor and pharmacist.

Medications can also interact with what we eat or drink, or with our activities. We may never notice many of these interactions. They might not affect how we feel or function. Ask your doctor or pharmacist if it’s safe to drink alcohol when taking your medications. Ask about each drug you take, whether prescription or non-prescription.
Medicines and Alcohol
Many drugs, even over-the-counter drugs and herbal supplements, interact dangerously with alcohol. Even a small amount of beer, wine, or liquor can change how a drug works in your body. Alcohol can get in the way of your medicine doing what it is supposed to do. For instance, alcohol can interfere with heart drugs, making you dizzy or faint. Giving your liver too much to process at once can also be unsafe. For example, if you take high doses of acetaminophen and have a few drinks every day, you could damage your liver.

Medicines and Driving
If you take a drug that makes you feel a little woozy, you should automatically adjust or limit your driving to stay safe. Problems can result when physiological changes of aging combine with drugs commonly prescribed for older adults.

Those prescription drugs are the ones most likely to increase the risk of driving problems and accidents. Don't ignore your body's reactions when you're on any medicines. If you feel drowsy, dizzy, nauseous, or headachy, you should not try to drive. In fact, you shouldn't drive until you know what effects your new medicine has on your body.
Here are some medication and driving tips:

> For any new medication, see how you react to it before attempting to drive; each person's reaction to any medication is unique to that person.

> Make sure you are free of any harmful side effects before driving; plan other ways to get around.

> Never have alcohol while on any medication without first consulting with your doctor or medical professional.

**Medicines and Food**

Even what you eat can mess with your medicine's work. Take steps to prevent drug-food interactions:

> 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.

**Medicines and Herbs**

Herbal products such as ginkgo biloba, St. John's Wort, or kava can interact with your prescription medication. Follow these guidelines for herbs:

> Learn as much as you can about a product before taking it.

> Some herbal products can interact with other medicines you take.
If you have a blood clotting disorder, diabetes, heart disease, high blood pressure, Parkinson’s disease, an enlarged prostate gland, a psychiatric problem, an autoimmune disease or other serious medical conditions, you should avoid taking herbal products unless under the supervision of a physician.

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.

Because the Food and Drug Administration does not test herbal products as they do traditional medicines, there is no guarantee of the exact strength of the ingredients.

Look on the label for the words “meets USP standards,” a sign that the product has been tested for quality and purity.

The label should list:
- An expiration date;
- A lot number, the amount of active ingredient per dose in milligrams (mg) or grams (gm);
- The form (e.g., powder or extract);
- Clear directions for use; and
- Other ingredients in descending order of the amount contained in the product.

The name, address, and phone number of the manufacturer or distributor should also be clearly stated on the label.

The container should have evidence of tamper proof protection.

**Play it safe**

Maybe you got your new prescription a while ago. Now, you vaguely recall hearing something about harmful interactions. It’s never too late to drop in at your pharmacy or to call your doctor’s office. In fact, asking for a check-up of everything you take is the most effective action to help avoid dangerous interactions. You may need to ask for this medicine interaction check-up, but it’s your right to get one.

Your pharmacy’s computer program can do this medicine interaction check quickly. However, it’s up to you to list every medication—prescription drugs, non-prescription drugs, and dietary and herbal supplements. Use your Personal Medication Record and keep it updated at every pharmacy visit.

Asking for a check-up of everything you take is the most effective action to help avoid dangerous interactions.
You can also begin an interaction search on your own. Read about cautions for your drugs. Use an online interaction checker. Take the results to your pharmacist or doctor or medical professional.

All medicines (prescribed, over-the-counter, and herbal supplements) are potentially dangerous for us. So it’s important to stay on the safe side by following these basic tips:

> Never take medicines from another person.
> Don’t mix medications unless indicated by your physician.
> Take medication at the doses and times prescribed.
> Never take medicines past their expiration dates.

5. NOTICE side effects.
Many of us become more sensitive to certain medicines as we grow older. Our bodies absorb and excrete drugs differently than when we were younger. So, some medicines have side effects.

We can’t control our sensitivity to drugs—but we can plan for it:

> Tell your doctor or medical professional how you normally react to drugs.
> Discuss how someone your age metabolizes drugs.
> Ask if a lower-than-normal dose of a new drug would be good to start with.
> Know the most common side effects to expect.
> Notice how your body reacts, especially when you begin a new drug.
> Understand which side effects to ignore, which to call your doctor or medical professional about, and which to seek immediate help for.
> Plan to report back to your doctor or medical professional to see how your dosage is working.
> For uncomfortable but expected side effects, ask your doctor or medical professional about switching drugs, or changing how you take the drug.

6. STORE your medications safely. Dispose safely too.
How many times have you heard that you shouldn’t keep medications in your bathroom medicine cabinet? Probably thousands. Well, at least hundreds. And where do you keep them?
Storage actually does matter. And the bathroom cabinet really is the worst place to keep drugs. Here’s why:

When a drug is manufactured, it keeps its potency, or strength, for only a certain time. That time is different for each drug. After that time, the drug’s chemical composition starts to change and the drug weakens or deteriorates. It can no longer have the intended health effect.

The change is slow, but certain. The drug’s expiration date is the time when its chemical composition will be too weak to help. Most of the chemical changes in a drug are not dangerous in themselves. But some are. That’s another reason why using a drug before its expiration date is crucial. These chemical changes can happen faster than your prescription’s expiration date—when the place where you store the drug is hot, moist, or sunny. That sounds like a lot of bathroom medicine cabinets, right?

Even using the hot water in a sink can be harmful to drugs you keep in the medicine cabinet. Our advice? Choose another place to store your medications. A drawer in your bedroom will be cooler, drier, and darker than your medicine cabinet.

Use these drug storage tips, too:

> Check the drug’s expiration date—old medicines may no longer work how they should.

> Keep your medicines separate from family members’ medicines so you don’t make the mistake of taking the wrong ones.

> Store medicine near a countertop so you can open the bottle on a flat surface. If you drop your pill, it won’t be lost down the drain or on the floor.
Remove the cotton plug, which attracts moisture, from medicine bottles.

Refrigerate drugs only when the label tells you to.

Keep oral and topical medications in separate places.

Keep all drugs away from children.

Always order child-resistant caps if children will be in your house.

Never throw expired or unused medicines in a wastebasket. This can be dangerous for both children and pets.

And most of all, think COOL, DRY, and DARK.

**Drug Disposal**

Knowing when and how to dispose of your medication is as important as storing it right. Dispose of your medication if the drug:

- has passed the expiration date
- looks discolored
- crumbles
- cracks or leaks
- changes color
- smells
- looks cloudy
- has thickened

How you dispose of drugs is tricky business. Flushing them down the toilet has always been popular, but this may cause environmental damage. Throwing them in the trash is simple, but may be risky if there are children or pets in your household. Some pharmacies send unused or expired medications back to the original manufacturer. Other pharmacies have medications burned. This may be the safest disposal option, but also the hardest. So follow-up with your pharmacist to see if he/she has any new disposal ideas.
VII. TIPS FOR CAREGIVERS

When you’re helping someone with medicines:

- **Insist on a medicine review at least once a year.** Gather every prescription drug, over-the-counter drug, and supplement that the person takes. For each one, ask the doctor and pharmacist, “Is this still needed?”

- **Ask about prescription “cascading.”** Sometimes, a doctor or medical professional adds a new medicine to treat the side effects of another one. This is called cascading. 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’s the hardest thing about taking it?
- If there were enough time, what would you say to your doctor or medical professional about this drug?
At the pharmacy, help your loved one fill out a patient profile form. The pharmacist can give you this form. On the next visit, make sure that the form is updated with any new prescription and over-the-counter medicines.

For each prescription, make sure you know the answer to:
“What is this medication and what is it supposed to do?”

“Is it safe to drive while on this drug?”

“What about drinking and eating?”

“Are there any side effects that I should watch for?”

Does the person you are helping live in a Medicare- or Medicaid-approved nursing home?
If so, there is a consulting pharmacist. Ask them to review all the medications that your parent or friend is taking. Check for duplications and possible interactions.
RESOURCES

AARP's Drug Comparison Research
This site summarizes what current medical research says about the effectiveness and safety of prescription drugs. You can make cost comparisons and learn about your options. Visit www.aarp.org/comparedrugs.

Commission for Certification in Geriatric Pharmacy
Locate a certified Geriatric Pharmacist by using the directory at www.ccgp.org or call 703-535-3038 to find one near you.

Medicines and You
“Medicines and You” is AARP’s new online course that will put you in control of your health by showing you the choices you have for using medications wisely and saving costs. The course is easy to follow, and you can go at your own pace. It includes resources such as lists of questions to ask your doctor and pharmacist and a personal medication record to track your medicines. Visit www.aarp.org/medicinesandyou.

Researching Your Health on the Web
Consumers want to take charge of their own health and be knowledgeable about their health condition and best treatments. The Internet offers quick access to medical information, but the amount of it can be overwhelming, and how do they know if it is reliable? AARP’s new online seminar helps users explore four reputable and easy-to-use websites to research their medical condition and medicines to treat it. Visit www.aarp.org/researchhealth.

National Council on Patient Information & Education (NCPIE)
Visit www.talkaboutrx.org or call 301-656-8565 for great ideas on how to use your medications safely and the questions to ask doctors or medical professionals and pharmacists.

Personal Medication Record
The best way to track medications and help your doctor or and pharmacist is to create a personal medication record. This is a list of all the medicines, including over-the-counter drugs and herbal supplements, that you take. Call 1-888-OUR-AARP to order a personal medication record form, stock number D18358, or download at www.aarp.org/usingmeds.

Senior Care Pharmacist
These pharmacists specialize in the medication-related needs of older adults. Find out more at www.seniorcarepharmacist.com. If you’re thinking about hiring one, search a directory to find a Senior Care Pharmacist in your area.
Medicines Made Easy
To order more copies:
Visit: www.aarp.org/usingmeds
Write: AARP
601 E Street, NW
Washington, DC 20049
Call: 1-888-OUR-AARP (1-888-687-2277)
1-877-434-7598 TTY
Stock #: D18366
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