

# Medication Safety for the Elderly: A Guide for Patients and Caregivers

Medications play an expanding role in health care as we grow older. People are more likely to develop one or more chronic illnesses with advancing age, and appropriate medication can help seniors live longer and more active lives. However, medication use in older adults is also more likely to be associated with safety concerns. In this handout, learn how to get the benefits of medicine, whether prescription or nonprescription, while minimizing and managing the risks.

## Seniors: Their medicines and safety

Why is medication safety a particular concern for the elderly?

- With a growing number of prescription medicines available and a growing population of older adults, the potential for medication safety problems is expanding.
- As people age, they are much more likely to be prescribed more than one kind of prescription medication, and many seniors take three or more. This increases the risk for drug interactions, mix-ups, and the potential for side effects.
- The effects of aging cause older adults' bodies to process and respond to medicines differently than those of younger people. Age-related changes in the liver, kidneys, central nervous system, and heart are among the contributing factors causing elderly people to be more vulnerable to overdose and side effects.
- Age-related challenges like memory loss or poor eyesight can make it harder to follow instructions for taking medication.
- Financial issues may prevent seniors from filling some prescriptions.

### High risk for Rx problems

It's dangerous not to follow the directions for taking medications, but some factors can make that hard as people get older. Seniors should consider asking for help from their family, caregiver, doctor, or pharmacist if they:

- Live alone.
- Take 3 or more medications, including nonprescription medicine and herbal or dietary supplements.
- Have memory problems or are not as sharp as they used to be.
- Get prescriptions from more than one doctor.
- Fill prescriptions at more than one pharmacy.
- Use both online and community pharmacies.

On the following pages are steps you can take to reduce your risk of medication safety problems, for yourself or for an older person in your care.



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## Be aware that medications can interact

When you take medicine, two kinds of interactions may occur:

- Drug-drug interactions happen when two or more medicines react with each other to cause unwanted effects or make either medicine's effects more or less potent. Such interactions may also be caused by alcohol, nutritional supplements or herbal products, and nonprescription medicines as well as prescription medications.
- Food-drug interactions happen when medicines react with foods or beverages. For example, grapefruit juice should not be taken with certain blood pressure–lowering medications, and dairy products should be avoided with some antibiotics and antifungal medications.

## At the doctor's office

Before your visit, be prepared to take an active role in your medication treatment plan. If possible, have someone come with you to help take notes and remember questions that need to be asked. If you help care for an elderly person, ask to stay with him or her during any conversations with the doctor.

- Make a list of questions you want to ask about your health and medications.
- Bring an up-to-date list of all the prescription and nonprescription medications you take, including herbal or dietary supplements and topical medications (i.e., those applied to the skin), along with key facts about your medical history. This is particularly important if you are visiting a doctor, clinic, or other health care professional for the first time.
- Once a year, request a “brown-bag review” in which you bring in all your medications for your doctor's advice. When you schedule your appointment, request extra time for this service.
- If your doctor prescribes medication, make sure you understand the name of the medicine (trade name and generic); how, when, and for how long you should take it; any precautions or warnings about the medicine; side effects to watch out for, and what to do if they occur.
- Ask what the medicine is intended to do, and whether you will need any lab tests to monitor your treatment.
- Ask how long you will be taking the medicine, and whether you should stop taking it once you feel better.

### Are you stuck in a medication cascade?

Sometimes, a doctor adds a new medicine to treat a symptom that may result, not from a medical condition, but from the side effects of another medicine. This problem, called “prescription cascading,” is especially likely if a patient takes several different medicines or goes to several different health care professionals or clinics for care.

If you take more than one kind of medicine, know the side effects that each one can cause, and make sure all your health care providers know what you are taking. Ask your doctor if you can stop, reduce the dose, or change any of your current medications instead of adding another medicine to the mix.



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- Be honest about any ways in which you are having trouble managing your current medication routine: forgetting or skipping doses, not filling a prescription, experiencing side effects, having trouble affording your medication, or feeling too dependent on a medication.
- If you already take a number of medications, ask your doctor:
  - > if the new medicine has any of the same actions or possible side effects (such as drowsiness or dizziness);
  - > if the new medicine might interact with anything you are already taking;
  - > if there are any nonmedicinal ways of treating your medical condition.
- Before you leave the doctor's office, speak up for yourself if:
  - > you still have unanswered questions;
  - > you didn't hear or understand any of the doctor's answers;
  - > you are not sure if you can carry out your treatment plan (and let your doctor know what things stand in the way);
  - > you felt too rushed to address your concerns.

### At the pharmacy

- When you get a prescription filled, bring the list of the medicines (prescription and nonprescription) that you take (including medications received by mail order). If your pharmacy keeps records on all the prescriptions you have filled there, make sure the list is up-to-date and includes medicines that you may have purchased elsewhere.
- After your prescription is filled, check that the medicine's name and directions are the same as what your doctor told you.
- Ask your pharmacist to confirm the directions that you were given for your medication, including warnings about interactions with foods or other drugs (including alcohol), possible side effects, and follow-up testing.
- Make sure medication is packaged in a way that you can access it easily (e.g., nonchildproof caps if you have arthritis, but be sure that such containers are kept safely out of the reach and sight of children who live in or visit your home).

### At home

- Read the information packaged with your medicine for important information.
- If you experience possible side effects, call your doctor or pharmacist. It's possible that you may do better on a different dose, especially at first, or your doctor may decide to switch you to a different medicine for the same condition.
- Keep an updated list of your medical history and all medications you take—prescription, nonprescription, and herbal or dietary supplements. Give a copy to family members.
- Use a pill organizer to track whether you have taken your pill(s). Other strategies include linking your medication routine to something you do every day (such as brushing your teeth) or using checklists.



# Medication Safety for the Elderly: A Guide for Patients and Caregivers

## Nonprescription medicines

Nonprescription medicines are convenient because they don't require a prescription, and many of these products can help relieve temporary minor conditions like headaches, indigestion, and cold symptoms. However, each year many older Americans are hospitalized because of problems related to nonprescription medications. Here are some potential problems:

- Seniors taking one or more prescription medicines may take a nonprescription medicine that causes the same effect (for example, lowering blood pressure).
- Nonprescription medicines may not be taken according to directions, or mix-ups may occur.
- Some medical conditions make certain nonprescription medicines potentially harmful, including high blood pressure and asthma.
- Age-related changes affect the body's ability to use nonprescription medicines, including those applied to the skin, just as they do for prescription medications.

These steps can reduce your risks from nonprescription medications:

- Even if you have been taking a nonprescription product for years, ask your doctor or pharmacist if it's still okay for you now.
- Always read and follow the "Drug Facts" label on the nonprescription product packaging. This label tells you what the medicine is for, how and when to take it, active and inactive ingredients, and warnings. Pay special attention to the active ingredient, and make sure you're not taking another product with the same or similar ingredient without your doctor's approval.
- Pick nonprescription medicines that treat only the symptoms you have.

Avoid multisymptom cold remedies (for instance, if all you have is a stuffy nose, get a product containing only a decongestant instead of one with a pain reliever, cough suppressant, decongestant, and antihistamine). Each of those active ingredients could cause potential problems, so keep it simple.

- Nonprescription medicines are usually meant only for short-term use. If your symptoms don't go away or worsen, talk to your doctor.

### Vaccines and safety

Many vaccines are important tools in preventing diseases that can cause life-threatening complications in the elderly. Immunizations, like any medication, can cause side effects. However, the risks are generally lower than the risks from complications of the diseases they prevent. For more information, contact the Immunization Call Center at 800-232-4636 (800-CDC-INFO), or e-mail questions to <mailto:nipinfo@cdc.gov>.

