



Knowledge is the best medicine

Refer to the *Get Going To Keep Going* guide and the section on 'Get to Know Your Medications' (page 12) for more helpful advice. Call 1-877-853-1195 to order your free copy today or visit www.wecare.ca to find the We Care office nearest you.

Medication misuse among older adults

Many seniors take medicines every day either to treat a chronic condition or as a preventive measure. However, research shows us that many older adults do not take their medications appropriately. Whether it is a result of not understanding how to take the drug, not hearing instructions, forgetting doses or having trouble seeing labels, the consequences of taking an incorrect or late dose can be dangerous.



The good news is that medication misuse can be prevented by putting precautionary measures in place. Read on for simple tips that will help you stay safe and feel better.

Don't mix pills and alcohol



Many people feel dizzy or experience other serious side effects when combining medicines and alcohol. This is because alcohol changes the way many medications work in the body and can even prevent them from being effective. If you want to enjoy a tittle while taking prescription medications, talk to your doctor first.

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Many pharmacies, many risks



Seniors often visit a number of clinics and specialists in a variety of locations for regular check-ups, diagnosis and treatment. It is often tempting to use the most convenient pharmacy—usually the first one on the way home—to fill a new prescription. But evidence shows that keeping and accessing prescription information from more than one place is risky for patients, care providers and even pharmacists themselves.

The following suggestions can help us and our loved ones avoid the side effects, harmful drug

interactions and misunderstandings that can occur when filling multiple prescriptions.

Use one pharmacy

It is best to fill all of your prescriptions at the same pharmacy. If you have existing repeat prescriptions elsewhere, ask for them to be transferred to a single location next time you request a refill (this is often a complimentary service).

Alternatively, you can ask your main pharmacist to call the secondary pharmacist or request

a new prescription from your doctor.

Maintain detailed records

Keep an up-to-date list of all your medications and supplements (both prescription and non-prescription) with you at all times. Always add new prescriptions and other items to the list right away. Show specialists and doctors the list at every appointment and make sure nurses, occupational therapists, physiotherapists and caregivers have the latest version.

Get free delivery

Sometimes picking up medications is the trickiest part, so find a pharmacy that offers a free delivery service (there are many that do). This will ensure timeliness and avoid uncomfortable in-store waiting times for you or your loved ones.

Carry it with you

Every time you fill a prescription, you should receive a printed sheet from your pharmacist that clearly explains all the possible side effects and best times of day to take your medicine. The pharmacist will also give you a wallet-sized list of all your prescriptions to carry with you in case of emer-

Using medications safely

Ensure you are using prescriptions safely with the following tips:

- **Keep records.** Write down the brand name and the scientific name, as well as the dosage, frequency and possible side effects, of all drugs you are taking. For example, Advil is the brand name and ibuprofen is the scientific (generic) name.
- **Watch for side effects.** When taking a new medication, look out for itchiness, a rash, swelling, difficulty breathing, nausea, feeling faint and depression. Talk to your pharmacist about the specific side effects you might expect.
- **Follow the directions.** It is important to take your medication at the same time each day, and to follow your pharmacist's directions.
- **Finish it all.** Take the entire prescription, even if you feel better.
- **Ask the pharmacist.** Find out if you should be abstaining from alcohol while you're on the medication. Also ask the pharmacist any other questions you might have. Don't be shy!
- **Store safely.** Store medication bottles safely up high, away from children, pets and sunlight. When they have expired, take them to the pharmacy for disposal.
- **Do not share!** Never offer your medication to or take drugs from anyone else, even if the labels look the same.

Adapted from: www.canadapharma.org

gencies. These sheets are usually attached to your receipt.

Pill reminders

Many drugstores sell 'pill minders,' which have individual compartments marked with the days of the week and times of day. Pill minders can be filled by caregivers weekly or monthly to decrease the chance of missing pills.

Your pharmacist can also 'blister pack' medicines. This is a simple system in which medications are placed in a sealed bubble card with labelled pouches for each dose. It offers a clear visual

reminder of what's to be taken when and reduces confusion.

Ask a pharmacist

Most pharmacies now offer a complimentary service where you can bring in your medications at a slow time of day to have the pharmacist review and explain them to you. Call ahead to make sure your pharmacy offers this service and confirm the most suitable time. The government of Ontario, for example, funds MedsCheck. This is a free 30-minute annual one-on-one appointment with a pharmacist for all Ontarians who are taking at least three medications.

Stay involved

It is important to trust your healthcare providers—your physician, specialist and pharmacist—but remember they are only able to give you advice if they have all the relevant information. Make sure you give them the details of every prescription and non-prescription drug you are taking, including herbal remedies and vitamins. Don't be afraid to ask questions or raise any concerns.

Adapted from: *Caregiver Solutions magazine*

Asking the right questions



Before you start taking a new medication, make the time to be sure you understand what you are taking and why. Here are some important questions:

- What is the name of my medication and why am I taking it?
- What is the best way to take this medication?
- When do I take it?
- What are the side effects?
- Should I avoid certain foods?
- What will this prescription cost?
- Is there a less expensive generic version?
- What happens if I run out of my medicine?

Along with asking your pharmacist about all of your prescriptions, it is also important to say if

you are confused about anything in your medicine routine or if you have a certain preference regarding any of your medications. The following tips can help make sure that you and your pharmacist are on the same page and you are doing all you can to prevent the dangers of medication misuse.

Learn the vocabulary

Ask your pharmacist to explain exactly what he or she means when using the term "Take as directed." Write the instructions down or make notes on the medication information sheet so you remember for next time.

Know your pills

Encourage your pharmacist to describe the colour and shape of

all your pills when he or she tells you the drug names. This way, if you forget the (often long and complicated) name, you will be able to identify which pill is which.

Request large-type labels

Prescription bottle labels are much easier to read when they are in larger type and on a flat surface (not circling a pill bottle). Ask your pharmacist to print out duplicates of all your pill labels in a large font, and have them placed on one fact sheet or medication box.

Sitting or standing

If you take your medications lying down, ask your pharmacist if this is a safe option for you. Some medications work faster when they can easily reach the stomach, which is aided by a sitting or standing position.

Is it easy to swallow?

If you are more comfortable taking your pills as tablets, capsules or liquids, ask if that option is available. If it is not, find out if you can crush tablets or open and dissolve capsules in water.

Adapted from: *Medication Matters* available on www.phac-aspc.gc.ca



Preventing hospital visits

Taking medicine incorrectly accounts for one in seven emergency-room visits for people older than 65 years.

Avoid trouble by:

- Always taking pills as directed by your doctor
- Never doubling up on a dose (even if you have missed one)
- Knowing which foods and over-the-counter products interact with your medicines



Get Connected!

Want to know more?

Be sure to follow We Care on *Twitter* (@wecareH_H) and *Facebook* (www.wecare.ca/Facebook) for regular updates with health tips and advice.

Visit these websites for more information:

- www.hc-sc.gc.ca
- www.phac-aspc.gc.ca
- www.canadapharma.org
- www.wecare.ca
- www.caregiversolutions.ca

Ask our experts

Forward your questions or comments, and we'll ask our experienced nursing team to provide you with the latest advice and information.

My mother uses vitamins and mineral supplements instead of her prescribed blood pressure medications. Is this safe?

It's very important for your mother to take her blood pressure medication as prescribed by her doctor. High blood pressure is called the silent killer because many people cannot tell if they have it. High blood pressure can lead to heart attack, stroke or an aneurysm. Have you taken your mother's blood pressure since she stopped taking her medication? Has she discussed these changes with her doctor? All these things are very important to ensure that your mother remains as healthy as possible.

My elderly aunt is forgetting to take her medicines and I live in another province. How can I help her remember?

Your local pharmacist can arrange for her medications to be put into a blister pack or dosette, which is a medication container that separates medications by day and time. This will assist your aunt in remembering to take her medication. You could also have someone come to your aunt's home, daily or a couple times a week, to remind her to take her medications. Is she forgetting anything else, such as eating or showering? Make sure you have your aunt checked out by her doctor to see if there is anything else going on.

My diabetic father often takes his pills after a glass or two of scotch. I am worried about him falling and about how well his medications are working.

You have valid reasons to be concerned. Falling is always a worry as people age, but the alcohol and Diabetes present 2 additional risks. You should accompany your father to the doctor and have an open discussion about the do's and don'ts of taking the scotch. Depending on what his medications are, one drink of liquor might not have a big effect on him—his doctor will be able to make this decision. As for his risk of falling, make sure he has a safe environment. Call We Care and ask for a complimentary copy of the *Independent Living Guide*—it'll help you survey every room in his home to ensure his safety. You can also go to the We Care website and check the *Get Going To Keep Going* guide for a Falls Risk Assessment. Perhaps you'd like a nurse to do an assessment of your father's home to see if there are any other areas of concern.

Attention caregivers

Ask for your complimentary copy of *Caregiver Solutions*® magazine, courtesy of your local We Care Home Health Services location. Visit www.wecare.ca or call 1-877-853-1195.



Send your questions to Julia Sommers at julia_sommers@wecare.ca



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