

Safe Use of Medicines

Take your medicines
the right way—each day!

From the National Institute on Aging



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Read this booklet for practical tips to make sure you are taking all your medicines the right way. Hear how other older adults practice medicine safety. Share this booklet with your family and friends. Pull it out now and again to remind yourself about medicine safety.

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Neighbors Gail and Alice talk about medicine safety

Alice: I'm glad to see you up and around, Gail. Your heart attack gave us all a scare.

Gail: Me too, Alice. After I got out of the hospital, it was hard to keep track of all my medicines. Can you believe it? I take eight different pills every day! Some with breakfast, some at dinner, two at bedtime.

Alice: How do you keep track of all those pills?

Gail: First off—I learned about my medicines. I talked to my doctor—asked a lot of questions. I wanted to know what I was taking and why. Then I wrote down all the drug names, when I should take them, and how much I need to take.

I keep one list taped to my kitchen cabinet and another in my purse. My medicine list comes in handy when I see the doctor and I want to ask about a certain pill.



Alice: What a good idea. James and I need to make a list too!

Gail: I have another tip. Buy a plastic pillbox. My husband helps me fill a week’s worth of pills at a time. I also leave notes on the fridge and by our bed that say, “Take your pills today!”

Alice: I’m going to try your medicine tips. I bet they will work for us. Gail, you sure aren’t taking any chances with your health.

Gail: Well—I take my pills just like the doctor says—that way I feel in charge of my good health.



Follow Gail's tips to stay on track with your medicines

- Keep a list of all your medicines in a safe place.
- Bring your list when you talk to your doctor or pharmacist.
- Use a pillbox.
- Put notes around the house to remind you to take your medicines each day.
- Talk to your doctor about all the medicines, remedies, and vitamins you use. Include any medicines you buy without a prescription. These are called OTC (over-the-counter) medicines. OTC drugs include things like cough syrup for a cold and antacid for an upset stomach.

Write down:

- the drug name, the doctor who prescribed it, and how much you take
- the name and amount of each remedy, vitamin, and OTC drug you take
- the time of day you take each medicine

Older adults use more medicines than people in other age groups

You may be surprised to learn that people like Gail and Alice who are over 65 years old tend to take more medicines than any other age group. Because older adults may have a number of diseases or health problems at the same time, it is common for them to take many different kinds of drugs.



Your questions answered

Q. I've been taking the same prescription medicine for years. Even though I'm careful to take the same amount as always, the medicine is not working like it did in the past. What is happening?

A. As you age, normal changes happen in the body. You lose water and muscle tone. Also, your kidneys and liver may not pass the drugs through your system as quickly as when you were younger. This means that many medicines act differently in older people. Medicine may take longer to leave your system.

Talk to your doctor if you think your medicine is not working as it should.

Q. Why should I talk to my doctor about the remedies, vitamins, and OTC (over-the-counter) medicines I take, along with my regular prescriptions?

A. It is very important to tell your doctor about all the medicines you take. Taking some OTC medicines with your prescription drugs can be dangerous. For example, you should not take aspirin if you are on Coumadin (warfarin) for heart problems.

Some OTC drugs can lead to serious problems if used too often or with certain other drugs. Combining drugs without talking to your doctor could make you sick.

Alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs can affect how well your prescription medicines work. Be honest with your doctor about how much alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs you use.

Tell your doctor about new medicines you're taking each time you visit. That goes for dentists, nurses, and physical therapists, too.

Q. I'm getting sick to my stomach a lot since I started my new pills. Some days I feel so sick I think about not taking the medicine. What should I do?

A. Talk to your doctor about any side effects before you stop taking any medicines. Your doctor may have tips that can help, such as eating a light snack with your pills. You may want to talk to your doctor about switching to a new medicine.

Q. What does it mean to take medicines on an empty stomach?

A. Taking medicines on an empty stomach means that you should take your pills 2 hours before you eat or 2 hours after you eat.

Two examples:

Eat first and take the pills 2 hours later.

If you eat breakfast at 8:00 in the morning, wait for 2 hours or until 10:00 in the morning before you take your pills.

Take the pills first and eat 2 hours later.

If you take your pills at 8:00 in the morning, wait until 10:00 in the morning to eat.

In both cases, your stomach will be empty enough for the pills to work.

Hints to get the best results from your medicines

Use this list to check off the tips you will try. Keep the list handy so you can read it each time you get a new medicine.

Keep a list

- I will write down the names of my prescription drugs and any vitamins, remedies, or OTC drugs I am taking.
- I will keep a list of the doctors who prescribed my medicines and the amount I take.
- I will add any new medicines to my list.

Check labels

- I will check the label on my medicine before I start a new medicine. I will make sure it has my name on it and that I understand the instructions.
- I will call the doctor or pharmacist if I have questions about how to take the medicine.

Take the medicine the right way

- I will take the medicine in the exact amount (never more or less) listed on the label.
- I will take the medicine at the times the doctor told me to take it.

- I will not stop taking my prescription drug unless my doctor says it is okay—even if I am feeling better.
- I will not break or crush my pills unless my doctor or pharmacist says it is okay.
- If I can't afford my medicine, I will talk with my doctor. There may be help.

Learn about side effects

- I will talk to my doctor or pharmacist if I have questions about the written information that comes with my prescription.
- I will call my doctor right away if I am having side effects. My doctor may be able to suggest another medicine or offer hints to lower the side effects.

Play it safe

- I will not give friends or family members medicine meant for me.
- I will not take medicine prescribed for others.
- I will not drink any beer, wine, or hard liquor while I am taking a medicine unless my doctor says it is okay.
- I will not take any medicine that is too old (expired date on the label).
- I will tell my doctor and pharmacist if I have any medication allergies.

Talk to your doctor and pharmacist— get the facts about your medicine



“I talk to my doctor each time she prescribes a new medicine. I take in my list of questions and go point by point. I also find my pharmacist helpful in answering my questions. I’m not one to take medicine without knowing the facts.”

Anyone can become addicted to prescription pain medicines. Never take more medicine than the doctor prescribes. Read more about opioids and prescription pain medicines in *Pain: You Can Get Help*. Contact the National Institute on Aging to get this brochure.

Questions to ask about your medicines

Ask these questions before you leave your doctor's office. Take this list with you each time you visit your doctor. Be sure to write your answers and keep them where you will see them.

Each time you visit, be sure to ask your doctor if you still need to be on all your medicines.

Ask your doctor:

1. What is the name of the medicine and why am I taking it?
2. What medical condition does this medicine treat?
3. How many times a day should I take this medicine? How much medicine should I take?
4. How long will it take this medicine to work? When should I stop taking it?
5. What should I do if I miss a dose?
6. Are there any side effects I should know about? When should I call you if I am having side effects?
7. Can I safely mix this medicine with the remedies, vitamins, and OTC drugs I am taking?

You and your pharmacist



“The labels were so hard to read. I asked my pharmacist to use bigger type on the label. He did it gladly. What a help!”

Before you leave the pharmacy, be sure to:

- Make sure the label has your name on it.
- Make sure you can read and understand the directions on the bottle.
- Make sure the directions are the same as your doctor said. If not, tell the pharmacist.
- Ask for an easy-open cap if you have trouble opening the bottle. Be sure to keep all medicines out of reach of children.
- Find out if the medicine needs be stored in a special place, such as the refrigerator.
- Should I take this medicine with food? Is there anything I should not eat or drink when taking this medicine?
- Is there a generic (non-brand name) version of the drug I can take?

- Is it safe for me to drive while taking this medicine?
- What does “as needed” mean?

Reading a Prescription Label

The diagram illustrates a prescription label with the following fields and their corresponding legend labels:

 Pharmacy Address, USA	←	Pharmacy name, address, and phone number
Dr. J. Smith	←	Doctor's name
1/11/2018	←	Date filled
Rx#: 636226	←	Prescription number
Jane Doe Main Street, USA	←	Patient's name and address
Name of medicine 10 mg tablet	←	Medication name and quantity
Take 1 capsule by mouth every day	←	How to take the medication
Refills: 3 Quantity: 30	←	Number of refills allowed by certain date
Discard after 12/11/2018	←	Date medication should no longer be taken

Your prescription label may have a different format than the one shown. The prescription number is usually printed in the upper left corner of the label.

For more information

Contact the following organizations to learn more about using medicines safely.

Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services

1-800-633-4227 (1-800-MEDICARE/toll-free)

1-877-486-2048 (TTY/toll-free)

www.medicare.gov

Eldercare Locator

1-800-677-1116 (toll-free)

www.eldercare.acl.gov

Food and Drug Administration

1-888-463-6332 (toll-free)

druginfo@fda.hhs.gov

www.fda.gov

National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health

1-888-644-6226 (toll-free)

1-866-464-3615 (TTY/toll-free)

info@nccih.nih.gov

www.nccih.nih.gov

Partnership for Prescription Assistance

1-888-477-2669 (1-888-4PPA-NOW/toll-free)

www.pparx.org

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services

Administration

1-877-726-4727 (toll-free)

1-800-487-4889 (TTY/toll-free)

<https://findtreatment.samhsa.gov>

U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs

Veterans Benefits Administration

1-877-222-8387 (toll-free)

www.va.gov/health-care/refill-track-prescriptions

To learn more about health and aging:

National Institute on Aging

Information Center

1-800-222-2225 (toll-free)

1-800-222-4225 (TTY/toll-free)

niaic@nia.nih.gov

www.nia.nih.gov

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