



***Medicines  
Use Them Safely  
A Guide for Older Adults***

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Did you know that people over age 65 make up 12 percent of the American population, but they take 25 percent of all prescription drugs sold in the country. As a group, older people tend to have more long-term illnesses - such as arthritis, diabetes, high blood pressure, and heart disease - than do young people. Because they may have a number of diseases or disabilities at the same time, it is common for older people to take many different drugs.

Keep in mind that “drugs” can mean both medicines prescribed by your doctor and over-the-counter (OTC) medicines that you buy without a prescription. OTC’s can include vitamins and minerals, laxatives, cold medicines, and antacids. Both prescription and OTC drugs can cause serious problems. Be very careful to take them exactly the way your doctor advises. To be safe, don’t mix them together or with alcohol without first talking to your doctor.

Many people over age 65 owe their lives in part to new and improved medicines and vaccines. Even though, drugs can be wonderful tools for the care of people of all ages, the use of these drugs may have risks, especially for older adults who use several medicines at one time.

You and your family should learn about the drugs you take and their possible side effects. Remember, drugs that are strong enough to cure you can also be strong enough to hurt you if they aren't used right.

## **Aging Increases Risk for Medication Problems**

In general, drugs act differently in older people than in younger people. This may be due to normal changes in the body that happen with age. As people age, they become more sensitive to medications and may experience adverse drug reactions or increases side effect. The reasons for this include:

- **Increased risk for those with chronic illness.** Older adults are more likely than any other age group to have one or more chronic illnesses, including heart disease, high blood pressure, diabetes, and arthritis. With some chronic medical conditions, the body may metabolize drugs less effectively.
- **Multiple medications.** Because 30% of prescription drugs are dispensed to people over 60 years of age, it is not unusual for an older person to be taking five or more medications sometimes several times per day. The more medications a person takes, however, increases a risk for interaction with other medication, food, or alcohol. Risk of adverse drug effects increases dramatically with each additional drug.
- **Complex dosage schedules.** When multiple medications are taken at different times each day, dosage schedules can often be complicated. This complication increases the risk of making a mistake, for example, taking a dose twice or forgetting to take a medication when prescribed.
- **Types of medication.** Older adults are more likely to be taking medications that have greater potential for causing adverse reactions - for example, cardiac, diuretic, anti-hypertensive, anticoagulant, and central nervous system depressant medications.
- **Age-related changes.** With age, there are certain physiological changes that can affect the way drugs interact with the body. Normal aging can alter the way drugs are absorbed, metabolized, distributed, and removed from the body.

### **Physical Changes That Affect How Drugs Act**

**Increase in Percentage of Body Fat:** As a person age, the ratio of lean body mass to body fat tissue changes. Although total weight may remain the same, the percentage of body fat does increase.

**Result:** Drugs distributed in fat have a broader and prolonged distribution. In other words, some medications may remain in the system for a longer period of time.

**Decrease in Body Fluid:** The percentage of body weight consisting of water decreases with aging.

**Result:** Drugs may become more highly concentrated, possibly exaggerating the medication's effect. Reducing the medication's effect. Reducing the medication dosage can prevent this problem.

**Decrease in Action of the Gastrointestinal Tract:** The emptying of the stomach slows down and food moves through the intestines at a slower rate, with age.

**Result:** The action of a medication may be decreased or delayed. Usually this change does not present a significant problem.

**Decrease in Liver Function:** As we age, the liver decreases in size, blood flow to the liver decreases, and enzymes (in the liver) that break down medications decline.

**Result:** Drugs can collect in the liver, causing toxicity. Reducing dosage can prevent this problem.

**Decrease in Kidney Function:** Similar to the liver, changes in kidney function occur with age. The kidneys often become smaller, blood flow to the kidneys decreases, and the kidneys become less effective at filtering toxins. Certain medical conditions such as heart failure, anemia, or dehydration may also contribute to impaired kidney function.

**Result:** Medication are filtered through the kidney more slowly; therefore these drugs may remain in the kidney for longer periods of time.

**Summary:** In general, older adults should approach medications differently than young and middle-aged individuals.

- Taking multiple medications at varying times increases the likelihood of making a mistake. Older adults taking more than one medication may consider using medication reminders such as daily or weekly pill dispensers or color-coded regimens to assist them with taking their medication as prescribed.
- Age-related physical changes can lead to greater drug sensitivity and exaggerated effects. Seniors need to practice caution and pay close attention to the types and amounts of medication they take. Asking specific questions to on'e physician AND pharmacist can help to reduce the chance of unnecessary drug reactions.
- Due to these age-related changes, the action of a drug may be less predictable than it is in a younger or middle-aged person. Therefore, the standard adult dose of some drugs may be altered or even reduced.

## **Medication Misuse Among Older Adults**

Although aging affects how medications are processed in our bodies, a major factor affecting how well a medication works is whether or not we take the medication as prescribed.

The consequences of mismanaging medications can be dangerous, and sometimes lethal. Despite the danger, however, many older adults do not take their medications correctly. There are a number of reasons why misuse occurs:

- Not understanding dosage instructions
- Not hearing dosage instructions correctly
- Not getting a prescription refilled
- Unpleasant taste of medication
- Having a confusing dosage schedule
- Not remembering to take medication
- Fear of becoming drug dependent
- Not being able to afford medication
- Limited ability to get to a pharmacy due to physical limitations or lack of transportation
- Impaired vision leading to difficulties with reading labels and distinguishing medications
- Not being able to open “childproof” medication containers

If you have questions about a medication, experience problems, or simply do not want to take a medication, consult your doctor or pharmacist immediately.

## Suggestions for Avoiding Medication Misuse

### Problem

### Possible Solutions

#### Impaired Vision

**Ask pharmacist** to use large print on label.  
**Use a magnifying glass** to check labels before taking medication.

#### Impaired Hearing

**Let others know** if you did not hear the instructions.  
**Ask doctor/pharmacist** to write instructions.  
**Ask someone** to go with you to the doctor.

#### Complex dosage schedule

**Write down** your schedule clearly and use colors to differentiate times of day. Use daily/weekly medication dispensers. Coordinate the time to take medication with specific activities (i.e., meal time, time of favorite television program, when mail arrives, etc.).

#### Forgetfulness

**Use memory aids** and daily or weekly medication dispensers. Place notes about medication in places you will see them.

#### Limited mobility

**Use a pharmacy** that will deliver prescriptions (cost may be higher).

#### Limited use of hands

**Ask pharmacist** for easy-to-open medication caps.

#### Multiple medications

**Have doctor** evaluate medication regimen regularly.  
**Use a pharmacy** that keeps a patient profile for customers.

**Multiple doctors**

**Make sure** each doctor knows all medications you are taking.

**Purchase prescriptions** at only one pharmacy.

**Cost of medications**

**Take advantage** of discount programs.

**Call local pharmacies** and compare prices.

**Ask doctor or pharmacist** whether a generic drug will be as effective and less costly.

**Ask doctor** to prescribe generic medications if possible.

**Ask doctor or pharmacist** if you qualify for a patient assistance program through a drug company.

## Prescription and Over-the-Counter (OTC) Medication

Medications include Over-the-Counter Medications (OTC) as well as prescription medications. People often think medications that do not require a doctor's prescription cannot be harmful. **This is not true!** Over-the-counter medications also can create problems if used improperly or used at the same time as prescription medications.

Because over-the-counter medications are used so frequently and can have harmful effects, it is important to know the differences between prescription and over-the-counter medications.

### Prescription Medications

- Require a written or prescription from a physician, dentist, or nurse practitioner. This prescription authorizes a pharmacist to dispense a particular medication.
- Are prescribed for the treatment of a specific medical problem.
- Are usually more powerful and have more side effects than over-the-counter medications.

### Prescription Labels

Prescription medications include important label instructions and must be followed carefully to ensure safe and effective use. Sometimes, however, the label can be confusing because instructions are not clear. For example:

- Take as directed. (What were the directions?)
- Take 4 times a day. (Around the clock or just during waking hours?)
- Take as needed. (What determines need?)
- Take before bedtime. (Immediately before sleeping or 1-2 hours before?)

For your health and well-being you need to know exactly what the directions on your medication labels mean. Do not be satisfied with vague instructions. Your health care provider, doctor, or pharmacist can advise you on the best time and the best way to take medication so you get the most benefit.

## **Over-the-Counter Medications**

- Can be bought without a prescription.
- Are intended for relief of minor ailments.
- Are considered safe if warnings and directions are followed.
- Can be harmful if misused.

Over-the-counter medications differ from prescription medications in that the particular ingredient, or mix of ingredients, and the recommended doses are considered relatively safe and problems are relatively unlikely. However, many over-the-counter medications contain strong agents. If taken in large quantities, some over-the-counter medications would be equal in strength to medications normally available only by prescription.

### **In What Ways Can Over-the-Counter Medications be Harmful?**

**OTC medications can change the effect of prescribed medications.** Over-the-counter medications can affect the action of prescribed medications. For example, making them stronger or less effective. Be sure to ask your doctor before taking any over-the-counter medication at the same time as prescribed medication.

**OTC medications can mask symptoms of disease.** Over-the-counter medications, especially when taken regularly, can reduce or completely dispel symptoms that warn of a more serious medical problem. For example, antacids taken for “upset stomach” may cover symptoms of ulcer disease, so diagnosis and treatment may be delayed.

**OTC medications can lead to overdose.** An over-the-counter medication, when taken in excess or combined with prescribed medication, may lead to symptoms of drug overdose. Once again, be sure to consult with a doctor or pharmacist before combining both OTC and prescribed medications.

**OTC medications can be harmful.** If misused, even common over-the-counter medications, such as aspirin, vitamins, or cold remedies can be harmful. Examples are:

- **Laxative.** Habitual use of laxatives and enemas can lead to loss of normal bowel function.
- **Antacids.** May produce magnesium toxicity in patients with renal (kidney) problems or may contribute sodium to the diet (examples: Alka Seltzer, Bromo Seltzer).

## **Two Important Suggestions Regarding OTC Medication Use**

**Be an informed consumer.** It is important to be as informed about the medications you take as about other products you purchase \*such as home appliances or video games).

Whenever using over-the-counter medication:

- Ask your doctor or pharmacist about drug interactions
- Read labels carefully
- Only take the directed dosage

Use medications responsibly. In order to avoid unnecessary medical problems, it is important to give over-the-counter medications the same care and respect given to prescription medications.

**Be an informed consumer and use medications responsibly.**

## Over-the-Counter Medications Are Drugs Too

Literally thousands of drugs are available for purchase “Over-the-Counter” (OTC), which means that a person does not need a prescription to buy them. Just because OTC drugs can be purchased without a doctor’s prescription does not mean they are harmless. Many of these drugs have side effects or may negatively interact with other medication being taken. Always check with a pharmacist or physician about possible drug interactions before taking any over-the-counter medication.

Below you will find a directory of common OTC ingredients, categorized by ailment. When shopping for an OTC, compare these ingredients with the ingredients listed on the outside of the packages.

**Allergies, Cough, and Colds:** Most OTC’s for colds or allergies contain a combination of ingredients intended to treat multiple symptoms. Often, a person may need only one ingredient. By taking a medication specific to a symptom, individuals can avoid side effects from medications they do not need. **(Remember, medications often labeled for “colds” will not cure a cold - they only relieve symptoms.)**

- **Decongestants** - Phenylephrine, ephedrine, phenylpropanolamine (PPA), or other words ending with “-ephine” or “-edrine.”
- **Antihistamine** - Chlorpheniramine or pyrilamine, or often words ending with “-amine.”
- **Expectorants** - Glyceryl guaiacolate and potassium iodide. The effectiveness of expectorants is unproved.
- **Cough suppressant** - Dextromethorphan hydrobromide.

**Constipation** - More than 700 OTC laxative products are available to the American public. Only the most popular types are listed below. Some experts warn against using laxatives too often and recommend instead using natural remedies for constipation.

- **Stimulant/irritant type of laxatives** (these are the least desirable) - Bisacodyl, phenolphthalein, castor oil types.
- **Saline cathartics**, (which remain in the intestines - Epsom salt (magnesium sulfate) - magnesium hydroxide, magnesium citrate.
- **Fecal softeners** (can make elimination easier) - Mineral oil, dioctyl sodium sulfosuccinate, dioctyl calcium sulfosuccinate.
- **Bulk forming laxatives** - Psyllium seed, methylcellulose, sodium carboxymethyl-cellulose, and tragacanth.

**Upset Stomach:**

- **Effervescent antacids** - Contain sodium bicarbonate (baking soda), potassium bicarbonate, and citric acid. Should be used sparingly and occasionally.
- **Aluminum hydroxide** - an effective antacid that will not cause stomach acid rebound, however it may cause constipation.
- **Magnesium hydroxide** - often combined with aluminum hydroxide, because this product is a known laxative and antacid.
- **Simethicone** - Also called polydimethylsiloxane. The FDA has ruled this product to be ineffective in relieving gas.

**Pain, Fever, and Headache**

- **Aspirin** - Aspirin is effective in reducing fever, pain and inflammation. Also, associated with increased stomach irritation, longer bleeding time, and “ringing in the ears.”
- **Acetaminophen** - No usual side effects. Does not cause gastrointestinal bleeding sometimes associated with aspirin, however, taken in large doses or for extended periods, it can cause liver damage.
- **Ibuprofen** - Although advertised as easier on the stomach than aspirin, the prescription formula of this product advises that it be taken with food.

**Diarrhea:** Although many OTC ingredients are purported to alleviate the symptoms of diarrhea, the FDA has stated that none effectively relieve diarrhea symptoms. Most bouts of diarrhea will spontaneously clear. Consult your physician if the diarrhea lasts for more than two days.

**Always check with a pharmacist or physician about possible drug interactions before taking any over-the-counter medication.**

## **Over-the-Counter Medication Labels**

Before taking any medication it is very important to read the label. Medication labels contain important information to help you take your medication correctly and prevent drug interactions and other drug-related problems. If you do not read a medication label, you may make mistakes in taking the medication and cause serious health related consequences.

Label for Over-the-Counter (OTC) medication have detailed information to assist in their proper use without the advice of a health care professional. However, over-the-counter medications are not without risk. The use of these medications is relatively safe only when the proper dosage is followed.

Reading labels carefully before purchasing an OTC medication is important, especially if you have a special health problem or are on a special diet. Some examples include:

- If you have high blood pressure or diabetes, you should not take decongestants unless prescribed by a doctor. Be reading the label, or asking your pharmacist, you can determine if an OTC cold medication is safe for you.
- If you have high blood pressure, or are on a low sodium or salt-free diet, you should avoid products containing sodium bicarbonate (a common antacid) or other forms of sodium. Labels provide ingredient information and may indicate whether a product is considered “salt-free” or low in sodium.

Before you purchase an OTC medication consider the following:

### **Medication Use**

- Can the drug be used in the way you plan to use it?
- Will it help to relieve the symptoms that you have?

### **Ingredients**

- Is there anything in the product you should avoid?
- Are you allergic to any of the ingredients?
- Are you sensitive to any ingredients because of a chronic health problem?
- If you are on a low-salt diet, what is the sodium content?
- If you are on a low-sugar diet, what is the sugar content?

**Warnings**

- What are the limits on taking this medication, if any?
- Who should not take the medication?
- Are you currently taking any medication that may interact with this medication?
- Are there any foods or beverages you should avoid while taking the medication?
- Are there any circumstances under which a person should see a doctor before taking the medication?
- What symptoms are listed that serve as warnings to stop taking the medication?
- When should a doctor be consulted if symptoms persist?

**Directions**

- What is the appropriate dose?
- How often should this medication be taken?
- In what manner should the medication be taken?

**Cautions**

- Are there any activities to avoid while taking the medication (e.g., driving, drinking alcoholic beverages, or being exposed to sunlight). Can you follow these cautions?
- What should you do in the case of an accidental overdose?

**Side Effects**

- What are possible side effects?

**Expiration Date**

- When does the medication expire? (Be sure to discard, and do not take, any medication after its expiration date.)
- Over-the-counter drug labels provide helpful information for the safe and effective use of various medications. However, it is important to read over-the-counter medication labels and follow directions carefully.

## **Adverse Drug-Drug and Food-Drug Medication Interactions**

Because older adults often take more medications than younger adults, the incidence of adverse drug reactions does increase with age. Adverse drug reactions, however, frequently go unnoticed or are misdiagnosed in older people for the following reasons:

- Drug reactions sometimes mimic signs or symptoms of disease (e.g., dementia).
- Symptoms of a drug reaction may be caused by an existing medical condition or the onset of a new health problem.
- Physical reactions to medication, such as fatigue, falling, or weight loss, may be mistakenly labeled as “normal” aging.

There are many physical signs that may be attributed to an adverse drug reaction. These include:

- Fatigue
- Constipation or diarrhea
- Confusion
- Incontinence
- Frequent falls
- Depression
- Weakness or tremors
- Excess drowsiness or dizziness
- Agitation or anxiety
- Decreased sexual behavior

If a problem develops shortly after a person begins taking medication it is wise to alert a physician immediately. Sometimes it takes time for an adverse reaction to occur, making it less likely the problem will be associated with taking medication.

### **Drug-Drug Interactions**

Another type of adverse drug reaction is a drug-drug interaction. A drug-drug interaction occurs when the effect of one drug is altered by the presence of another drug in the body. For example:

- One drug might reduce or increase the effects of another drug.
- Two drugs taken together may produce a new and dangerous interaction.
- Two similar drugs taken together may produce an effect that is greater than would be expected from taking just one drug.

Prescription drugs can interact with each other, for example:

- Mixing anti-diabetic medication (e.g., oral hypoglycemics) and beta blockers (e.g., Inderal) can result in the decreased response of the anti-diabetic drug and increased frequency and severity of low blood sugar episodes.
- Mixing anti-diarrhea medication (e.g., Lomotil) and tranquilizers (e.g., Transxene, Valium, sedative (e.g. Dalmane, Quaalude), or sleeping pills (e.g., Amytal, Nembutal, Seconal) can result in an increased effect of tranquilizers, sedatives, or sleeping pills.
- Mixing antihypertensive medication (e.g., Reserpine, Aldoril, Combipres) and digitals (e.g., Lanoxin) can result in abnormal heart rhythms.
- Mixing anticoagulants (e.g., Coumadin, Warfarin) and sleeping pills (e.g., Nembutal, Amytal, Seconal) can result in decreased effectiveness of the anticoagulant medication.

In addition to prescription medication over-the-count medications can interact with each other. Some examples include:

- Taking a cough medication with alcohol at the same time as an antihistamine medication can increase drowsiness and decrease alertness.
- Mineral oil taken with fat-soluble vitamins (A,D,E,K) can decrease the absorption of the vitamins.

In addition to interacting with each other, over-the-counter medications can also interact with prescription medication. Some examples of this type of interaction include:

- Aspirin can significantly increase the effect of blood thinning drugs (anticoagulants), thus increasing the risk of excessive bleeding.
- Antacids can cause blood-thinning drugs (anticoagulants) to be absorbed too slowly.
- Antacids can interfere with drug absorption of antibiotics (i.e., tetracycline), thereby reducing effectiveness of the drug in fighting infection.
- Antihistamines, often used for allergies and colds, can increase the sedative effects of barbiturates, tranquilizers, and some prescription pain relievers.
- Decongestants in cold and cough medications can interact with diuretics or “water” pills to aggravate high blood pressure.
- Iron supplements taken with antibiotics can reduce or stop the ability of the antibiotics to fight infection. (The chemicals in the supplement and the antibiotic bind together in the stomach instead of being absorbed into the bloodstream.)
- Salt substitutes can interact with “water” pills or blood pressure medication to increase blood potassium levels. This can result in symptoms of nausea, vomiting muscle cramp diarrhea, muscle weakness, and cardiac arrest.

These are just a few of the many interactions that can occur when multiple medications are taken together. Check with your doctor or pharmacist to make sure your medications do not have the potential to interact.

### **Drug and Food Interactions**

When drugs and certain foods are taken at the same time they can interact in ways that diminish the effectiveness of the ingested drug or reduce the absorption of food nutrients. Additionally, vitamin and herbal supplements taken with prescribed medication can result in adverse reactions.

Some examples of how foods and drugs can interact include:

- Food can speed up or slow down the action of a medication.
- Impaired absorption of vitamins and minerals of a medication.
- Impaired absorption of vitamins and minerals in the body.
- Stimulation or suppression of the appetite.
- Drugs may alter how nutrients are used in the body.
- Herbs may interact with anesthesia, beta-blockers, and anticoagulants.

Foods containing active substances that work against medications can produce unexpected or adverse effects. If you are taking medication, the food you eat or the supplements you take could cause the medication to work incorrectly.

Check with your pharmacist on how food can affect your specific medications.

### **Factors Affecting the Extent of Interaction Between Foods and Drugs**

The impact of food-drug interactions will depend on a variety of intervening factors. For example:

- The dose of the drug.
- A person's age, size, and state of health.
- When the food is eaten and when the medication is taken.

Avoidance of drug interactions does not necessarily mean avoiding drugs or foods. In the case of Tetracycline and dairy products, these should simply be taken at different times, rather than eliminating one or the other from the diet. Having good information about the medications you take and timing your medication around your food intake can help to avoid drug interaction problems.

## Systems to Keep Track of Taking Medications

To get the most benefit and to reduce potential risks, you must take medications as directed. Organizing your medications can be difficult, especially if you take several medications each day, at different times, and with different instructions. Two common concerns when managing medication include:

- **Keeping track of multiple medications.**
- **Remembering whether or not a medication has been taken.**

An organized system for taking medications can make medication management easier and help to guarantee you are taking your medication as directed. Keep in mind any limitations you may have (e.g., vision, memory, or mobility) when creating a medication system. It is important to develop a system that works for you.

### Medication Chart

A medication chart is a written record of all the medications you take and when you take them. This should be kept in a place where it is easy to read and refer to such as the bathroom or kitchen. This is a good record to have regardless of whether you need medication reminders or not.

- Use a good-sized sheet of paper.
- Draw five columns and label the top of each column with the following:
  - \*Medication Name and Purpose (what is the medication used for?)
  - \*Colors and Shape
  - \*Directions (how should medication be taken?)
  - \*Times (when should medication be taken?)
  - \*Pharmacy source (where do you get the medication? Local pharmacy, mail in pharmacy, other)
- Complete this information for each medication you take.
- Include all over-the-counter medications you may be taking as well.

### Medication Check-off Chart

A medication check-off chart can be used to remind you to take medications and/or remind you whether a medication has been taken. This chart can be kept near where medications are stored or can be carried with you.

- Use an oversized index card or a larger sheet of paper to record your medication information.
- List the names and directions for each medication you are taking down on the left side of the card.
- Draw seven columns and put the day of the week at the top of each column.
- Write down times when each medication is to be taken (e.g., a.m., lunch, p.m., bed time).
- At the time you take each medication cross off that section on the chart.
- Make photocopies of the chart so you have a new one to use each week.

### **Color-coded Chart**

A color-coded chart can be used in combination with a medication chart or check-off chart. It can be particularly useful for people who have difficulty reading the print on prescription labels.

- Use colored self-adhesive labels or colored markers to code the labels of the medication containers.
- Use colors that are distinctly different from one another. For example, it can be difficult to tell the difference between red and orange, or between dark blue and black.
- Make sure you see the colors clearly.
- Put a color mark by the name of the medication on your chart that matches the color mark on the label of that medication's container.
- Be sure to mark the medication containers, NOT the caps. Sometimes caps are returned to the wrong containers. Also, be sure to keep medications in their original containers.
- When refilling a prescription, be sure to give the new medication container its proper color code.

### **Medication Calendar**

Calendars can be helpful in remembering to take medications. If you take medication only once a day, consider using a daily tear-off calendar. You tear off the dated page after the medication is taken. When multiple medications are taken, a large calendar with large squares may be helpful. You mark on each day which medication should be taken and when. Each time you take a medication, you place a check in the square.

### **Envelope System**

An envelope system can be particularly useful for a person who has difficulty opening bottles or reading medication labels. Before using an envelope system, be sure the medication is not light sensitive. Two envelope systems are used:

- System I. Place each medication into a separate envelop. Print the name of the medication, dosage, and dosage times on the envelope.
- System II. A day's worth of pills is put into one envelope. Each envelope is labeled with the day of the week, the dosage and description of each medication, and when it is to be taken. Small envelopes containing medication also can be affixed to a dated square on a calendar.

### **Container Systems**

A daily container system might be helpful if you take the same dosage of medications every day. It works best if you take the same pills every day and if pills look

different. Example containers might be a small glass or plastic bowls or plastic lids turned upside down.

- Check with your doctor or pharmacist first before using any container system that exposes the medication to light, air, or moisture. You need to know if any of your medications will lose their strength if left out in the open for a few hours.
- Label each compartment with the hours of the day, for example one dish is 8 a.m., one is 12 p.m.
- Put the pills into the appropriate compartment each morning.
- Take pills that are in the 8 a.m. compartment at that time, 12 p.m., and so on.
- Do not use egg cartons because of possible traces of bacteria.

### **Commercial Medication Systems**

Commercial medication systems are designed for multiple and single dosage, lasting for a day or for a week. You can fill the container all at once and then take your medications at the specified times. When purchasing medication containers, be sure that individual compartments are large enough for fingers to easily retrieve and to fit multiple pills.

### **The Calendar (or “Blister”) Card**

The Calendar Card is a day-by-day dose card that makes medication taking easier, especially for people who take several medications at different times. A pharmacist prepares these cards.

- A card is prepared for each time of day a person takes medication. If a person is to take medication four times during the day, four cards would be prepared, labeled for different times.
- All medication doses are sealed into the card.
- Each card contains 31 separate sections (called “blisters”) large enough to hold several pills or capsules. Each blister has the date of the month next to it, from 1 to 31, with corresponding stickers indicating the day.
- Cards are customized for each person and repackaged to accommodate changes in prescriptions.

Any system that aids you in taking your medications as instructed is helpful. **A medication system only works if you use it carefully!**

## **Guidelines for using Medications Safely**

Today's medications are more effective than ever before; however, any medication, if used improperly, is potentially dangerous. Although our government works to ensure medications we take are safe and our doctors and pharmacists help us to take what is appropriate, how we take our medication is ultimately our responsibility. Consider the following guidelines when using medications:

### **Be Informed**

- Know the name of each medication you are taking, the proper dose, what it is treating, and any possible side effects.
- Be sure you can read the label on the medication bottle. Ask the pharmacist to use large type if you cannot read the medication label.
- If you do not fully understand the directions on how your pharmacist or doctor immediately. If you are hard of hearing, ask that the directions be written down for you.

### **Take Medication Only as Directed**

- Remember, your medication may not work properly if instructions are not followed exactly.
- Be sure to take any medication only as it is prescribed. Do not change the dose or stop taking a medication without consulting your physician.

### **Continue to Take a Medication Until the Doctor Tells You to Stop**

- Even if symptoms have disappeared and you are feeling better, continue taking any medication until you finish the prescription. If you stop taking medication too soon the problem may return or worsen.
- If you feel a medication is not having the effect the doctor intended or seems to be doing more harm than good, call your doctor immediately.

### **Be Honest With Health Care Professional**

In order for doctors or other health care professionals to provide help, it is important to give them complete and accurate information.

When you go to visit the doctor be sure to mention:

- Any symptoms you have. Describe all your symptoms and answer all questions as accurately as you can. This will help the doctor determine the best treatment.
- All medications you are taking. Without knowing what other medications you are taking, a doctor may prescribe a medication that is the same or similar to

one you already take or that may cause a drug interaction. Remember, herbs, vitamins, over-the-counter medications, and medicinal agents obtained from health food stores are also medications. Tell your doctor how much and how often you take such items.

- Anticipated problems in taking your medication. If you think you will not be able to take a medication for whatever reason, say so and be specific.
- Directions not followed. If you did not take a previous medication or missed a few doses, tell your doctor. If the doctor is not informed, he or she may believe a treatment is not working and provide another, less effective medication. Be being open and honest, you can avoid any misunderstandings or unnecessary changes in treatment.
- Side effects or unusual reactions. Share information about any allergies, side effects, or unusual reactions you have had to previous medications. The better the information you share, the more it can help your doctor to prescribe a medication that will work best for you.

### **Take Medication in Its Original Form**

- Never crush pills or open capsules to make them easier to swallow, unless this is approved by a health care professional. Changing the form of any medication may alter how well it works in your body or may result in stomach irritation. In addition, ingesting time-releases capsules that are crushed may result in over medication or worse, a drug overdose.

### **Keep a Current Medication and Health Record**

The record should include the names of all prescription and over-the-counter medications that are taken. The dosage and length of time you have taken these medications should also be included. Be sure to list any herbal or nutritional supplements as well.

Share your medication record with any doctor or pharmacist you see. This is particularly important if you see two or more doctors or if you use more than one pharmacy. This record can help your health care professional to prescribe and provide medications that will not negatively interact. By sharing this information, you can avoid unnecessary problems.

### **Carry a Medication/health Card in Your Wallet**

- A medication/health card should contain important facts about your health, for example, any health problems, the medications you take, and any medications that produce an allergic reaction.
- The card can be helpful if you are involved in an accident, you faint or black-out, or you are away from home and need medication. This card could save

your life by informing medical professionals of your unique health need.

- Consider wearing an Emergency Medical identification bracelet if you know you have an allergic reaction to a particular medication or other substances (e.g., bee venom) or suffer from a specific disease, such as diabetes.

### **Use One Pharmacy**

- It is recommended you get all of your medications at the same pharmacy. This will help the pharmacist to keep complete and accurate records of all your medications and be alert to possible problems.
- A pharmacist who knows your medication history can also advise you better about over-the-counter medications and herbal or vitamin supplements. Using one pharmacy is particularly important if you are seeing more than one doctor and taking multiple medications.
- If you move and change pharmacies, request a copy of your medication profile to take to your new pharmacist or physician.

## Medication “Don’ts”

- **Do not share medications.** Sharing prescription medications is dangerous. What is safe and effective for one person may produce side effects, no relief, or a severe reaction for another person. As a result, never take medications prescribed for someone else or lend medications prescribed for you. Even if your symptoms appear the same, you may be suffering from an entirely different problem.
- **Do not take medications without checking the label.** Always be sure you are taking the right medication by reading the label carefully before you take any. If it is dark in the room, turn on a light. If you need glasses to read, be sure to wear them to read the medication label.
- **Do not use old or expired medications.** Medications that are expired are not as effective and can cause a person to become ill if ingested. Be sure to check the expiration date on all prescription or over-the-counter medications **BEFORE** you take them. Do the same with any herbal or vitamin supplements.
- **Do not dispose of medications improperly.** Medication prescribed for a previous condition or that has expired or changed in color or odor should be disposed of. Discard all oral medications by flushing them down the toilet and throwing the empty containers in the garbage. Ask your pharmacist about the safest way to dispose of needles and syringes. Do not throw these items in the garbage where they can injure someone.
- **Do not ask for unprescribed refills.** Do not ask the pharmacist for a prescription refill if the doctor has not authorized it. Avoid any extended automatic refill arrangements. Instead, consult with your doctor about your medications every 3 to 6 months.
- **Do not store medications anywhere there is heat, light, or moisture (e.g., a window sill, above the oven, or in a bathroom).** Unless otherwise instructed store medication in a cool dry, and dark place, preferably at temperatures between 50-68 degrees F. Light, heat, and/or humidity are the “enemies” of most medication and can cause them to lose strength, disintegrate, or become dangerous due to a chemical change.

*Sources:*

*National Institute on Aging*

*New York State Aging Well Village*

*Ohio Department of Aging*

*Ohio State University Extension*