

# Medicines: Use Them Safely

Adapted from the National Institute on Aging

People age 65 and older consume more prescription and over-the-counter (OTC) medicines than any other age group. Older people tend to have more long-term, chronic illnesses — such as arthritis, diabetes, high blood pressure and heart disease — than do younger 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.

Many older people owe their health in part to new and improved medicines and vaccines. But using medicines may be riskier for older adults, especially when several medicines are used at one time. Taking different medicines is not always easy to do right. It may be hard to remember what each medicine is for, how you should take it and when you should take it. This is especially true of people with memory problems or dementia.

Medicines may act differently in older people than in younger people. This may be because of normal changes in the body that happen with age. For instance, as we get older, we lose water and lean tissue (mainly muscle) and we gain more fat tissue. This can make a difference in how long a drug stays in the body.

Keep in mind that “drugs” can mean both medicines prescribed by your doctor and over-the-counter (OTC) medicines, which you buy without a doctor’s prescription. OTC’s can include vitamins and minerals, herbal and dietary supplements, laxatives, cold medicines, and antacids. Taking some OTC’s together with prescription medicines can cause serious problems. For example, aspirin should not be taken with warfarin (Coumadin). Be sure your doctor knows what medicines you are taking and assures you that it is safe for you to take your medicines together. Also ask about taking your medicines with food. If you take alendronate (Fosamax) with food, for example, the drug will be less effective. Herbal supplements also should be taken with care. Gingko biloba, for instance, should not be taken with aspirin, acetaminophen, warfarin, or thiazide diuretics because it may increase blood pressure and the risk of bleeding problems.

You and your family should learn about the medicines that you take and their possible side effects. Remember, medicines that are strong enough to cure you can also be strong enough to hurt you if they aren’t used correctly. Here are some hints to help avoid risks and get the best results from your medicines:

## At Home

- DO keep a daily checklist of all the medicines you take. Include both prescription and OTC medicines. Note the name of each medicine, the doctor who prescribed it, the amount you take, and the times of day you take it. Keep a copy in your medicine cabinet and one in your wallet or pocketbook.
- DO read and save any written information that comes with the medicine.

- DO check the label on your medicine before taking it to make sure that it is for the correct person — you — with the correct directions prescribed for you by your doctor.
- DO take medicine in the exact amount and precise schedule your doctor prescribes.
- DO check the expiration dates on your medicine bottles and throw away medicine that has expired.
- DO call your doctor right away if you have any problems with your medicines or if you are worried that the medicine might be doing more harm than good. He or she may be able to change your medicine to another one that will work just as well.
- DO NOT take medicines prescribed for another person or give yours to someone else.
- DO NOT stop taking a prescription drug unless your doctor says it's okay — even if you are feeling better.
- DO NOT take more or less than the prescribed amount of any medicine.
- DO NOT mix alcohol and medicine unless your doctor says it's okay. Some medicines may not work well or may make you sick if taken with alcohol.

### **At Your Doctor's Office**

- DO review your medicine record with the doctor or nurse at every visit and whenever your doctor prescribes new medicine. Your doctor may have new information about your medicines that might be important to you.
- DO always tell your doctor or nurse about past problems you have had with medicines, such as rashes, indigestion, dizziness or not feeling hungry.
- DO always ask your doctor or nurse about the right way to take any medicine before you start to use it.
- DO ask these questions (and write down the answers) before leaving your doctor's office:
  - ♦ What is the name of the medicine and why am I taking it?
  - ♦ What is the name of the condition this medicine will treat?
  - ♦ How does this medicine work?
  - ♦ How often should I take it?
  - ♦ How long will it take to work?
  - ♦ How will I know if this medicine is working?
  - ♦ How can I expect to feel once I start taking this medicine?
  - ♦ When should I take it? As needed? Before, with or between meals?  
At bedtime?
  - ♦ If I forget to take it, what should I do?
  - ♦ What side effects might I expect? Should I report them?
  - ♦ How long will I have to take it?
  - ♦ Can this medicine interact with other medicines (prescription and OTC's including herbal and dietary supplements) that I am taking now?
  - ♦ If I don't take medicine, is there anything else that would work as well?

### **At the Pharmacy**

- DO make sure you can read and understand the medicine name and the directions on the container. If the label is hard to read, ask your pharmacist to use larger type. Let your pharmacist know if you have trouble opening the medicine bottle.
- DO check the label on your medicine before leaving the pharmacy to make sure that it is for the correct person — you — and with the correct directions prescribed for you by your doctor. If not, tell the pharmacist.

**The Health Promotion Unit at the NYC Department for the Aging conducts lectures on Medication Management for senior groups.**

**For further information contact 3-1-1.**