Using medications wisely

Because such enormous strides have been made in the field of medicine, many of us today feel comfortable taking drugs for nearly every ailment. But unfortunately, the more medicines we take—whether prescription, over-the-counter (OTC) or herbal—the more likely we are to develop problems with them.

Over- or under-medication, or interactions between medications, can result in everything from mild discomfort to serious complications, including hospitalization and death. In fact, one in seven of all the hospitalizations of older adults in the United States is the result of a problem with medications.

Before using your medicine

Whenever your doctor recommends a medicine, ask questions—it's your body and you should know exactly what you are putting into it. Don't trust your memory, particularly if you are taking several medications; write down your questions and your doctor's answers, then keep your notes for future reference. You can also ask your pharmacist questions when you get your prescription filled.

Before taking any medicine, be sure to know the answers to the following questions. It may seem like a long list, but getting the answers means you'll be getting the full benefit from your medicine.

- Why am I taking this medicine, and how will the medicine help me?
- How long will it take to begin working, and how will it make me feel?
- How much should I take at one time, how often do I take it, and how long will I need to take it? (Until it runs out? Until my symptoms are gone? Forever?)
- When is the best time to take it? (Before during or after meals? At bedtime? As needed?)
- How should I take it? (With water? With fruit juice? With food?)
- What do I do if I miss a dose?
- What food, drinks or other medicines should I avoid while I'm taking this medicine?
- Are there restrictions on my activities? (Should I avoid driving? Should I stay out of the sun?)
• What are the drug's side effects, and how can I minimize them?
• What do I do if I have a negative reaction, or if I don't notice any change in my symptoms?
• Are there non-medical alternatives for treating my condition? (Could I change my diet or take up a discipline like yoga instead of taking the medicine?)
• Does my age affect the dosage of the medicine? (Some older people should receive lower doses of some medicines.)
• How much does the medicine cost? Is there a cheaper, generic version of it that works just as well?
• How do I get my prescription refilled, if necessary?

Also, before you take any new medications, make sure your doctor knows:

• If you've ever had an allergic reaction to a drug, food or other substance
• If you are on any kind of special diet (low-sugar, low-salt, etc.)
• If you are pregnant, plan to become pregnant, or are breast-feeding
• If you're currently taking or have taken recently, any other medicine, dietary supplements, laxatives, pain relievers, home remedies, herbs or antacids
• If you have medical problems other than that for which your medicine is prescribed
• If you have trouble remembering things or reading labels
• Your smoking, drinking or exercise habits
• Illnesses or conditions that run in your family (such as high blood pressure, depression or diabetes)

If you visit a new pharmacy that does not have access to your complete medication records, it is important that you tell the pharmacist your medication history.

How to take your medicine

Your health care provider should prescribe medicine for you with specific instructions on how and when to take it. Ignoring or going without these instructions could force you to pay an even higher price—physically and financially—for your health care. Following instructions exactly means taking the right medicine and dose at the right time for the length of time prescribed. Taking too much or too little of a medicine, even if it's OTC, or taking it too frequently or not often enough, can result in serious side effects.

Take the medicine for as long as you have been directed, even if your symptoms stop; otherwise, your symptoms may come back. However, if you develop unpleasant side effects, report them to your doctor. Also tell your doctor if you don't feel your medicine is working. Keep in mind, however, that many medications require time, sometimes days or weeks, before they become fully effective.
Also, never give your medicine to anyone else. It has been prescribed for you and your particular conditions, and may cause serious side effects in someone else, even if they have a similar health history.

When taking most long-acting forms of medication, each dose should be swallowed whole. Do not break, crush or chew before swallowing, unless you've been told it is all right to do so; long-acting medicine has been developed to break down in your body in a certain way and on a certain schedule, and chewing, crushing, etc. may disrupt this process. If you are having trouble swallowing the medicine whole, talk to your doctor or pharmacist about taking it in a different form. If you are taking medicine with water, use a full eight-ounce glassful, not just enough to get the medicine down. Too little liquid can sometimes prevent it from working properly.

If you are taking liquid medication, use an accurate measuring device. Shake liquid suspension medicines before pouring, so the ingredients mix together properly.

If you find it difficult to open child-resistant caps, ask your pharmacist for a regular, easy-to-open cap. You may need to request it every time you have a prescription filled. Also, if you have difficulty reading labels, ask your pharmacist for medicine labels with larger lettering.

**Pill-splitting**

To save money, people sometimes buy their prescriptions in a dose twice as high as they need, then split the pills in half. For instance, if a bottle of 40 mg pills costs the same amount as a bottle of 20 mg pills, they will buy the bottle with the higher dose and then split each pill in half, thereby getting twice the amount of medicine for the same amount of money. If conditions are right, this is a safe, economical practice. But before splitting any pill, check with your doctor. Some pills have timed releases, and cutting them in half will disrupt the way in which the medicine is released into your body.

**Keeping track**

Develop a system for taking your medicines properly, especially if you take a number of medications daily. If you take one or two medicines a day, you may only need to take them at the same time that you perform another regular task, such as getting dressed or brushing your teeth. If you take several medicines at different times of the day, you may want to use a check-off sheet to help you keep track. Keep the sheet in the place where you store your medications, and mark off each dose as you take it. This is also a good place to note any unusual side effects. The sheet serves as a complete medical record at exam time and helps your doctor determine whether your medications need adjusting.

Keeping track also means you won't run out of medication at refill time. Give yourself enough time to avoid weekends or holidays when the doctor may be harder to reach or the pharmacy may be closed.
A special note on acetaminophen

Acetaminophen, the active ingredient in Tylenol, is toxic if taken in large doses, especially for people with kidney damage. While you may already be careful not to exceed the recommended dosage on Tylenol products, be aware that acetaminophen is frequently an added pain reliever in cold medications, antihistamines, and other OTC drugs. Be sure to read all medication labels carefully before taking them, with special attention to how much acetaminophen you may be taking. **If you have taken more than the recommended dose, call the Poison Control Center hotline (1-800-222-1222); this national number automatically connects you to your local poison control center.**

Storing your medicine

It goes without saying that medicine should be stored out of reach of children, but did you know there are other factors that affect how you should store your medicine?

- Keep medicines in their original containers and never take off the label
- Because heat, direct light and moisture make medicines break down, don't keep them near heat sources or windows, inside an automobile, or in damp places like the bathroom or near the sink.
- Don't leave the cotton plug in a medicine container after you open it, because it may draw moisture into the container.
- Set bottles and containers in a clear area, well back from the edge of the surface.
- Keep liquid medicines from freezing, and don't store any medications in the refrigerator unless directed to do so.

When you travel, keep your medicines with you instead of checking them with your luggage. Checked luggage may get lost or stored in a very hot or cold area. Make sure you take enough medicine with you to last for the entire trip (plus an extra day or two in case your plans change) or find out whether you can get your prescription refilled while you are away. It's a good idea to take your written prescription with you when you travel. Also, carry in your wallet a card (available at many pharmacies) that lists any chronic medical conditions you may have, the medicines you take, and your allergies and drug sensitivities. Keep the card up-to-date. In addition:

- Read the labels of both prescription and OTC medications carefully to determine potential side effects and proper usage.
- If you are pregnant or breast-feeding (or think you might be pregnant), or if you take an MAO inhibitor or have a serious, chronic condition such as asthma, diabetes, glaucoma or heart disease, contact your doctor before taking any OTC medication.

Also keep in mind that drugs begin to deteriorate from the minute they are made. Their expiration dates reflect the manufacturer's estimate of when their effectiveness will begin to decline. A medicine taken after the expiration date may have lost its potency or even
developed harmful properties as a result of the deterioration. To get the maximum value out of any medication, store it according to the manufacturer's recommendations and discard it after it has expired.

**Call Poison Control (1-800-222-1222) immediately** if you think you've taken the wrong medicine or the wrong amount of medication, if you have taken an overdose or if you think a child has accidentally taken a medication.

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**Decision Helper**

**Medication use**

Do these apply:

- You think you have taken the wrong medication or the wrong dosage
- You think you have taken an overdose of medication
- You think a child has accidentally taken a medication

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**Final note**

A properly stocked home medicine cabinet helps you prepare for common health problems and may save you unnecessary trips to the doctor or pharmacy. Just be sure you keep your medicines up-to-date and follow all safety and dosage requirements outlined by your health care provider or pharmacist and follow the instructions on medication labels.

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