

How to Manage Your Medications



By Moira Fordyce, M.D.

Mary Brown (not her real name) was 78 years old when she came to see me. Her memory was poor, and she had been having periods of confusion. A blood test revealed a low white blood cell count. After questioning about prescription and over-the-counter preparations, it turned out that Mrs. Brown was on eleven medicines simultaneously, several of which were known to cause confusion in older people. I admitted her to the hospital for further investigation and carefully discontinued all but two of her medicines. Within two days her confusion was gone, and she was saying it was a long time since she had felt this good. Her white blood cell count started to improve and was back to normal in two weeks.

We have at our disposal some wonderful, lifesaving medicines; among their many benefits are preventing illnesses, treating infections, and relieving pain, but each one is a double-edged sword—it can help or hurt, and medication reactions become more common as we grow older. As we age, our body changes and reacts differently to medications. Also:

- Persons 65 and older consume more than one fourth of all medicines in the United States.
- The average 65 and older person uses four or more medicines simultaneously.
- One in three hospital admissions in older adults is in some way related to medication reactions.

Reactions can occur after taking the same medication for

many years, can be the result of starting a new medication, or can be because of reactions between medications. Sometimes what happens is a physician prescribes a medication; the patient experiences side effects, goes to a different doctor, and is given a new prescription to treat the side effects. The patient still feels ill, so might go to the pharmacy and purchase a nonprescription preparation and take it in addition to the others. This can be a damaging downward spiral.

With a few exceptions, such as antibiotics, we usually need smaller doses, less often, as we grow older. However, you should never change the dosage without checking first with your healthcare provider.

Here are twenty golden rules for managing your medicines at any age:

1. Know what you're taking and why. A concerned doctor will be happy to answer these reasonable questions.

2. Know when to take each medication.

Before, during, after, or between meals? Before going to bed?

3. Always take the exact dosage prescribed.

Too much of a medicine can cause an overdose; too little can stop the medicine from doing its job. Ask what to do if you miss a dose—don't just double up the next one.

4. Know what to take each medicine with.

Most medicines are best taken with water only. Some should be taken on an empty stomach, and some with or after food. Milk and dairy products must be avoided with some; grapefruit juice can increase the blood level of others. It is wise to avoid mixing alcohol and medications.

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5. Know how long to go on taking a medication.

It is of great importance to finish the whole course of, for example, an antibiotic, even if you are feeling better. If it is a medicine such as thyroid replacement, you will need to take it for the rest of your life.

6. Know how soon to reasonably expect results from the medicine.

Some take several days, or even weeks, to build up in the body and take effect, so don't become discouraged by this delay.

7. Either make a list of ALL medicines you take and review it with your healthcare provider, or bring every medicine you take with you to the visit.

Include any bought without prescription at the pharmacy, vitamins, minerals, eyedrops, herbal remedies, and alternative therapies. A common over-the-counter medicine like aspirin can combine with a prescription anticoagulant (blood thinner) and cause internal bleeding. Many nonprescription and prescription drugs, either on their own or combined with others, can impair thinking and cause confusion in older adults.

8. Ask if there are any activities you should avoid while taking the medicine.

The ability to drive and operate machinery can be impaired by some medicines.

9. Have your medicines list reviewed and updated at least every six months.

You can do this by telephone or when you see your healthcare provider. Carry a list or a wallet card with you and update it each time your regimen changes in any way.

10. Make a schedule or use a calendar.

Mark on it when you take your medicine. Or use a pill container with sections labeled for each day of the week. At the beginning of the week put all your pills in the correct slots; then all you have to do is look, and you will know whether you have taken them each day.

11. Store your medicines correctly—ask your doctor or pharmacist for the right place.

Not in sunlight, not in a warm place, not on the television set.

12. Don't keep your medicines on your bedside table.

It's all right to put one dose there if you need to take it in the middle of the night, but some people waken, while still drowsy forget they've had a dose, and if the whole bottle is

there, take another. Don't take your medicine in the dark, and never try to swallow it while lying down.

13. Keep medicines in their original container.

Make sure the container is clearly labeled with your name, the name of the medicine, the dosage schedule, and the expiration date.

14. Do not share your medicine with a family member, friend, or neighbor.

What helps you could hurt someone else.

15. Make sure your medications are not accessible to children or pets.

You can request easily opened containers from the pharmacist, but be sure to keep them out of reach of any children who might visit you.

16. Check your labels to see if you can read them easily.

You can ask the pharmacist to type the label in large print so that you can read it without difficulty.

17. You can often save money by using a generic brand.

Ask if there is a less expensive generic version of the medicine that is just as effective.

18. Never take old or expired medicines.

Take old or expired medicines back to your pharmacist for safe disposal.

19. Avoid combining alcohol and medications.

Of the 100 medicines prescribed most often, over half contain at least one substance that reacts badly with alcohol. Potential effects of mixing alcohol and medicines may range from drowsiness to liver damage, coma, or even death.

20. Use one pharmacy and get to know your pharmacist.

He or she can keep track of all your medicines and advise you if there is any conflict.

Medication used safely can work wonders. Be sure your healthcare provider knows about everything you take, no matter how minor it may seem.

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