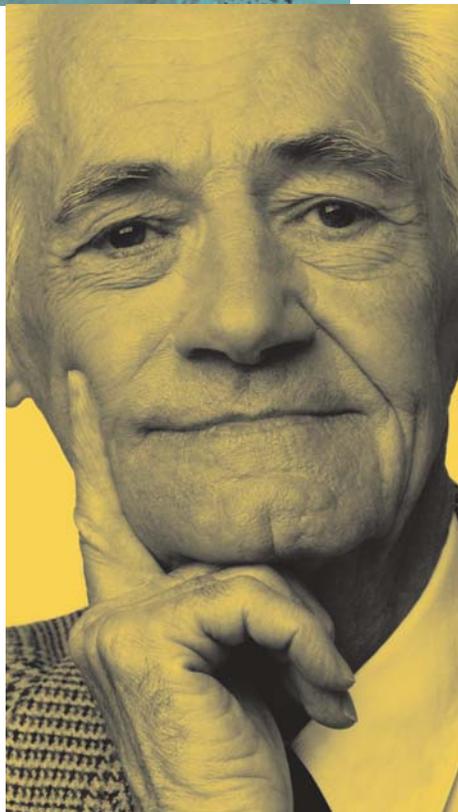


# Medicines and You:

## A Guide for Older Adults



Council on Family Health

Provided in cooperation with  
**U.S. Department of Health and Human Services**  
Food and Drug Administration  
and the Administration on Aging

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Use the medicine chart on pages 16-17 to keep a written list of your medicines and other important health information.



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**[www.fda.gov](http://www.fda.gov)**

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**[www.aoa.gov](http://www.aoa.gov)**

*As you age, it is important to know about your medicines to avoid possible problems.*



## **Aging and Health: You and Your Medicines**

**A**s you get older you may be faced with more health conditions that you need to treat on a regular basis. It is important to be aware that more use of medicines and normal body changes caused by aging can increase the chance of unwanted or maybe even harmful drug interactions.

The more you know about your medicines and the more you talk with your health care professionals, the easier it is to avoid problems with medicines.

As you age, body changes can affect the way medicines are absorbed and used. For example, changes in the digestive system can affect how fast medicines enter the bloodstream. Changes in body weight can influence the amount of medicine you need to take and how long it stays in your body. The circulation system may slow down, which can affect how fast drugs get to the liver and kidneys. The liver and kidneys also may work more slowly, affecting the way a drug breaks down and is removed from the body.

Because of these body changes, there is also a bigger risk of **drug interactions** for older adults.

**Drug-drug interactions** happen when two or more medicines react with each other to cause unwanted effects. This kind of interaction can also cause one medicine to not work as well or even make one medicine stronger than it should be. For example, you should not take aspirin if you are taking a prescription blood thinner, such as warfarin, unless your health care professional tells you to.

**Drug-condition interactions** happen when a medical condition you already have makes certain drugs potentially harmful. For example, if you have high blood pressure or asthma, you could have an unwanted reaction if you take a nasal decongestant.

**Drug-food interactions** result from drugs reacting with foods or drinks. In some cases, food in the digestive track can affect how a drug is absorbed. Some medicines also may affect the way nutrients are absorbed or used in the body.

**Drug-alcohol interactions** can happen when the medicine you take reacts with an alcoholic drink. For instance, mixing alcohol with some medicines may cause you to feel tired and slow your reactions.

It is important to know that many medicines do not mix well with alcohol. As you grow older, your body may react differently to alcohol, as well as to the mix of alcohol and medicines. Keep in mind that some problems you might think are medicine-related, such as loss of coordination, memory loss, or irritability, could be the result of a mix between your medicine and alcohol.

For more information about alcohol and medicines, visit the U.S. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration at <http://www.samhsa.gov>

*Some medicines can interact with other medicines, foods, drinks or health conditions.*



### **What Are Side Effects?**

Side effects are unplanned symptoms or feelings you have when taking a medicine. Most side effects are not serious and go away on their own; others can be more bothersome and even serious. To help prevent possible problems with medicines, seniors must know about the medicine they take and how it makes them feel.

Keep track of side effects to help your doctor know how your body is responding to a medicine. New symptoms or mood changes may not be a result of getting older but could be from the medicine you're taking or another factor, such as a change in diet or routine. If you have an unwanted side effect, call your doctor right away.

## **Talk to Your Health Care Professionals**

It is important to go to all of your medical appointments and to talk to your team of health care professionals (doctors, pharmacists, nurses, or physician assistants) about your medical conditions, the medicines you take, and any health concerns you have.

It may help to make a list of comments, questions, or concerns before your visit or call to a health care professional. Also, think about having a close friend or relative come to your appointment with you if you are unsure about talking to your health care professional or would like someone to help you understand and/or remember answers to your questions.



*Tell your health professionals about your medical history and about all medicines or supplements you take.*

## **Here are some other things to keep in mind:**

**All Medicines Count:** Tell your team of health care professionals about all the medicines you take, including prescription and over-the-counter medicines, such as pain relievers, antacids, cold medicines, and laxatives. Don't forget to include eye drops, dietary supplements, vitamins, herbals, and topical medicines, such as creams and ointments.

**Keep in Touch with Your Doctors:** If you regularly take a prescription medicine, ask your doctor to check how well it is working, whether you still need to take it, and, if so, whether there is anything you can do (like lowering fats in your diet or exercising more) to cut back or, in time, stop needing the medicine. Don't stop taking the medicine on your own without first talking with your doctor.

**Medical History:** Tell your health care professional about your medical history. The doctor will want to know if you have any food, medicine, or other allergies. He or she also will want to know about other conditions you have or had and how you are being treated or were treated for them by other doctors. It is helpful to keep a written list of your health conditions that you can easily share with your doctors. Your primary care doctor should also know about any specialist doctors you may see on a regular basis.

**Eating Habits:** Mention your eating habits. If you follow or have recently changed to a special diet (a very low-fat diet, for instance, or a high-calcium diet), talk to your doctor about this. Tell your doctor how much coffee, tea, or alcohol you drink each day and whether you smoke. These things may make a difference in the way your medicine works.

*A pill box can help you remember when to take your medicines.*



## **Recognizing and Remembering to**

**Take Your Medicines:** Let your health care professional know if you have trouble telling your medicines apart. The doctor can help you find better ways to recognize your medicines. Also tell your doctor if you have problems remembering when to take your medicines or how much to take. Your doctor may have some ideas to help, such as a calendar or pill box.

**Swallowing Tablets:** If you have trouble swallowing tablets, ask your doctor, nurse, or pharmacist for ideas. Maybe there is a liquid medicine you could use or maybe you can crush your tablets. Do not break, crush, or chew tablets without first asking your health professional.

**Your Lifestyle:** If you want to make your medicine schedule more simple, talk about it with your doctor. He or she may have another medicine or ideas that better fits your lifestyle. For example, if taking medicine four times a day is a problem for you, maybe the doctor can give you a medicine you only need to take once or twice a day.

**Put It in Writing:** Ask your health care professional to write out a complete medicine schedule, with directions on exactly when and how to take your medicines. Find out from your primary care doctor how your medicine schedule should be changed if you see more than one doctor.



*Your pharmacist can help keep track of your medicines.*

## **Your Pharmacist Can Help Too**

One of the most important services a pharmacist can offer is to talk to you about your medicines. A pharmacist can help you understand how and when to take your medicines, what side effects you might expect, or what interactions may occur. A pharmacist can answer your questions privately in the pharmacy or over the telephone.

### **Here are some other ways your pharmacist can help:**

- **Many pharmacists keep track of medicines on their computer.** If you buy your medicines at one store and tell your pharmacist all the over-the-counter and prescription medicines or dietary supplements you take, your pharmacist can help make sure your medicines don't interact harmfully with one another.
- **Ask your pharmacist to place your prescription medicines in easy-to-open containers** if you have a hard time taking off child-proof caps and do not have young children living in or visiting your home. (Remember to keep all medicines out of the sight and reach of children.)
- **Your pharmacist may be able to print labels on prescription medicine containers in larger type**, if reading the medicine label is hard for you.
- **Your pharmacist may be able to give you written information** to help you learn more about your medicines. This information may be available in large type or in a language other than English.

# What You Need to Know About Your Prescription Medicines

The following questions will help you get the information you need when you visit your doctor and pharmacist.\*

## **Before you leave the doctor's office with a new prescription, ask:**

- What is the name of the medicine and what is it supposed to do? Is there a less expensive alternative?
- How and when do I take the medicine and for how long?
- Whether to take it with water, food, or with a special medicine, or at the same time as other medicines.
- Can it be taken with over-the-counter medicines? If so, when?
- What to do if you miss or forget a dose.
- Whether you take it before, during, or after meals.
- The timing between each dose. For example, does "four times a day" mean you have to take it in the middle of the night?
- What your doctor means by "as needed."
- Are there any other special instructions to follow?
- What foods, drinks, other medicines, dietary supplements, or activities should I avoid while taking this medicine?
- Will any tests or monitoring be required while I am taking this medicine? Do I need to report back to the doctor?
- What are the possible side effects and what do I do if they occur?
- When should I expect the medicine to start working, and how will I know if it is working?
- Will this new prescription work safely with the other prescription and over-the-counter medicines or dietary supplements I am taking?



*Keep an up-to-date list of all your medicines, prescription and over-the-counter.*

**At the pharmacy, or wherever you get your medicines, ask:**

- Do you have a patient profile form for me to fill out? Does it include space for my over-the-counter drugs and my dietary supplements?
- Is there written information about my medicine? Ask the pharmacist if it's available in large print or in a language other than English if you need it.
- What is the most important thing I should know about this medicine? Ask the pharmacist any questions that may not have been answered by your doctor.
- Can I get a refill? If so, when?
- How and where should I store this medicine?

\* These questions are based on information found on the National Council on Patient Information and Education's web site at **[www.talkaboutrx.org](http://www.talkaboutrx.org)**.





*Before you travel,  
discuss your medicine  
schedule with your  
doctor or pharmacist.*

## Taking Prescription Medicines

**Follow your doctor's instructions** and read (and keep) the package insert information, if available. Have your doctor write down instructions if you don't understand or are worried about forgetting them.

**Take your medicines for the whole time** they are prescribed, even if you feel better.

**Take only your own medicines.** Taking someone else's medicine may hide your symptoms and make diagnosing your illness more difficult for your doctor.

**Know about your medicines.** If you take more than one medicine, be able to tell them apart by size, shape, color, number or name imprint, form (tablet or capsule), or container.

**Plan for medicines you need to take during the night.**

If you need to take more than one medicine, try not to keep them by your bedside. If you must, and there are no small children or pets in your home, place the pills you will need during the night on your bedside table. Turn on the light and make sure you're taking the right medicine at the right time.

**Organize your medicines at home.** Many people use a chart or written schedule to keep track of their medicines. Some find containers with different colored caps, different sections or with alarms that go off at set times helpful.

**Keep medicines in a cool, dry place, away from bright light.**

A kitchen cabinet or bedroom shelf may be good storage places. Medicines should not be kept in places where heat and moisture can alter their effectiveness. Do not keep medicines in the refrigerator, unless your doctor or pharmacist, or the label, tells you.

**Before you travel, ask your doctor or pharmacist how to adjust your medicine schedule to account for changes in time, routine, and diet.** Bring the phone numbers of your doctors and pharmacists with you. When flying, carry your medicines with you; do not pack them in your checked luggage. When traveling, always keep medicines out of heat and direct sunlight.

**If there are children in your home, remember to put medicines out of their sight and reach,** and don't take medicines in front of them.

**Get prescriptions refilled early enough** to avoid running out of medicine, which may cause problems with your medicine schedule.

**If you to buy medicines on the Internet, check the web site for the Verified Internet Pharmacy Practice Sites (VIPPS) program** and seal of approval to make sure the site is properly licensed and has been successfully reviewed and inspected by the National Association of Boards of Pharmacy ([www.nabp.net](http://www.nabp.net)).

**Always keeps medicines in their original containers,** and never put more than one kind of medication in the same container.

## Taking Over-the-Counter Medicines

Today's medicine cabinets contain a growing choice of over-the-counter, OTC, medicines to treat a growing number of health problems. Common OTC medicines include pain relievers, laxatives, cough and cold products, and antacids. Some OTC medicines, however, can affect the way prescription medicines work or are used by the body. Always talk with your doctor about all OTC medicines you take. Here are some important tips to remember:

### **Always read and follow the directions on the medicine label.**

OTC medicine labels give you all the information you need to take the medicine the right way and tell you:

- Active and inactive ingredients,
- What the medicine is used for,
- Interactions or side effects that could happen,
- How and when (or when not) to take the medicine,
- Other warnings.

**Choose OTC medicines that have only the ingredients you need.** It is a good idea to only use medicines that treat the problems or symptoms you have. Ask your pharmacist for help. If you are taking more than one medicine, pay attention to the "active ingredients" to avoid taking too much of the same ingredient.

### **Check for package tampering and the expiration date.**

Don't buy medicines if the packaging has been broken or if the expiration date has passed. The expiration date tells you the date after which the product may not be as effective.

**Talk to your doctor if taking an OTC medicine becomes a regular habit.** Most OTC medicines are only to be used for a short time.

If you have questions about specific medicines, visit the National Library of Medicine's web site at [www.medlineplus.gov](http://www.medlineplus.gov) and click on "Drug Information."

## Cutting Medicine Costs

Medicines are an important part of treating an illness because they often allow people to remain active and independent. But medicine can be expensive. Here are some ideas to help lower costs:

**Tell your doctor if you are worried about the cost of your medicine.** Your doctor may not know how much your prescription costs, but may be able to tell you about another less expensive alternative.

**Ask for a senior citizen's discount.**

**Shop around.** Look at prices at different stores or pharmacies. Lower medicine prices may not be a bargain if you need other services, such as home delivery, patient medicine profiles, or pharmacist consultation, or if you cannot get a senior citizen discount.

**Ask for medicine samples.** If your doctor gives you a prescription for a new medicine, ask your doctor for samples you can try before filling the prescription. (Make sure you know the right way to use the sample medicine and ask for any other important product information.)

**Buy bulk.** If you need to take medicine for a long period of time and your medicine does not expire quickly, you may be able to buy a larger amount of the medicine for less money.

**Try mail order.** Mail-order pharmacies can provide medications at lower prices. However, it is a good idea to talk with your doctor before using such a service since there may not be a health care professional there to talk to and it may take a few weeks for medicine to get to you. Make sure to find a back-up pharmacy in case there is a problem with the mail service.

**Buy OTC medicines when they are on sale.** Check the expiration dates and use them before they expire. If you need help choosing an OTC medicine, ask the pharmacist.

# Tips for Seniors on Safe Medicine Use

- ✓ **Learn about your medicines.** Read medicine labels and package inserts and follow the directions. If you have questions, ask your doctor or other health care professionals.
- ✓ **Talk to your team of health care professionals** about your medical conditions, health concerns, and all the medicines you take (prescription and OTC medicines), as well as dietary supplements, vitamins, and herbals. The more they know, the more they can help. Don't be afraid to ask questions.
- ✓ **Keep track of side effects or possible drug interactions** and let your doctor know right away about any unexpected symptoms or changes in the way you feel.
- ✓ **Make sure to go to all doctor appointments** and to any appointments for monitoring tests done by your doctor or at a laboratory.
- ✓ **Use a calendar, pill box or other things,** to help you remember what you need to take and when. Write down information your doctor gives you about your medicines or your health condition.
- ✓ **Take along a friend or relative to your doctor's appointments** if you think you might need help to understand or to remember what the doctor tells you.
- ✓ **Have a "Medicine Check-Up" at least once a year.** Go through your medicine cabinet to get rid of old or expired medicines and also ask your doctor or pharmacist to go over all of the medicines you now take. Don't forget to tell them about all the OTC medicines or any vitamins, dietary supplements, and herbals you take.
- ✓ **Keep all medicines out of the sight and reach of children.**

## **For more information contact:**

### **U.S. Department of Health and Human Services**

*www.dhhs.gov*

### **Administration on Aging**

*www.aoa.gov*

202-619-0724

*AoAInfo@aoa.gov*

### **Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality**

*www.ahrq.gov*

### **Food and Drug Administration**

*www.fda.gov*

1-888-INFO-FDA

### **Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration**

*www.samhsa.gov*

*www.findtreatment.samhsa.gov*

1-800-662-HELP

### **National Institutes of Health**

*www.nihseniorhealth.gov*

### **National Institute on Aging Information Center**

*www.niapublications.org*

1-800-222-2225

1-800-222-4225 TTY

### **National Library of Medicine**

*www.medlineplus.gov*





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