

Avoiding Overmedication and Harmful Drug Reactions

As you grow older, you are more likely to develop long-term health conditions that require taking multiple medications. Many older people also take over-the-counter (OTC) medications, vitamins, or supplements. As a result, older adults have a higher risk of overmedication and unwanted drug reactions (adverse drug reactions). According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), adverse drug reactions result in over 700,000 visits to emergency rooms each year. Many adverse drug reactions can be prevented.

To lower the chances of overmedication and adverse drug reactions, the American Geriatrics Society's Health in Aging Foundation recommends the following tips for safe medication use.

If you care for someone who needs help managing their medications, these steps can help prevent overmedication and related problems.

Ask before taking an OTC

Some over-the-counter medications (OTCs) can cause serious side effects in older adults. OTC medications—like ibuprofen and naproxen—have different names but belong to the same drug. Taking both drugs at the same time is the same as taking a double dose, and could cause problems. Also, OTC drugs and supplements may interact with your prescription medications.

■ **You should always check with your healthcare provider or pharmacist before taking any OTC drug or supplement.**

Make a list and keep it updated and handy

Make a list of all the medications you take, their doses, how often you take them and for which condition. Be sure to include in the list any OTC drugs, vitamins, supplements, or herbal or other remedies. Remember to add any new medications or doses to your list when a change is made.

■ **Share this list—and any updates—with all of your healthcare providers and caregivers. Take the list with you to each medical appointment, and carry the list with you at all times, in case of a medical emergency.**

Review your medications

Once or twice a year, ask your primary healthcare provider to review your list of medications, supplements, and vitamins.

■ **Ask whether you still need to take each one at its current dose. Your provider may want to stop some of your medications.**

▶ Ask questions

Whenever you are prescribed a new medication or your dosage is changed, ask why. Ask your pharmacist to check on drug interactions for you, especially if you're already taking five or more medications.

Also ask:

- What is the purpose of the medication, and how will I know if it is working?
- What side effects should I watch for?
- When and how should I take the medication?
- What should I do if I miss a dose?
- Will it affect any other medical conditions that I have?
- Is a generic or lower-cost brand name version of the medication available?

Organize your medications

Consider using a weekly medication organizer. If you have vision problems, your pharmacist can put large print labels on your medication bottles. If it is difficult for you to open the bottle, your pharmacist can give you non-childproof caps.

- Ask your pharmacist for tips on how to organize and keep track of your medications.

Follow directions

Take your medications exactly as agreed with your healthcare providers. Be sure you understand how, when, and for how long you should take each medication.

Try to have all your prescriptions filled at the same pharmacy so the pharmacist is aware of all the different medications you are taking.

- Tell your provider or pharmacist about any bad reactions you've had to medications in the past.

Report problems

If you begin to have new health problems after starting a new medication, you may be having a reaction to the medication. Tell your healthcare provider about this right away.

- If you have a serious reaction, such as difficulty breathing or swelling in your throat, call 911 and go to the emergency room immediately.

Medication Don'ts

- Don't take medication that is not prescribed for you
- Don't use medication that has passed its expiration date listed on the bottle
- Don't stop taking medication just because you feel better
- Don't drink alcohol when you take medication for sleep, pain, anxiety, or depression



40 FULTON STREET
SUITE 809
NEW YORK, NY 10038
212.308.1414 TEL
Info@healthinaging.org

The AGS Health in Aging Foundation is dedicated to improving the health, independence, and quality of life of all older people. We aim to empower older adults and caregivers to actively participate in their health care and decision-making.

DISCLAIMER: This information is not intended to diagnose health problems or to take the place of medical advice or care you receive from your physician or other healthcare provider. Always consult your healthcare provider about your medications, symptoms, and health problems. April 2023

©2023 Health in Aging Foundation. All rights reserved.