

# Safety Tips for Seniors Who Take Two or More Medicines

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# Staying Safe

Knowing how to take medicine safely at home is part of staying healthy. This booklet offers information to help you understand what you can do to be safer when taking medicines.

There are two sections in this booklet.

- ◆ Section One offers tips and information to help you stay safe.
- ◆ Section Two has worksheets where you can record your personal health information and keep track of your medicines.

Fill out the forms in the back of this booklet and show them to your doctors, nurses and pharmacist.

Working with your healthcare team, you can take medicine safely.



# Types of Medicine

When talking about “medicine”, this booklet refers to four areas:

- ◆ **Prescription Medicine-** This is medicine your doctor tells you to take for a health condition. You need a signed paper from your doctor or your doctor must call a pharmacy for you to get these medicines.
- ◆ **Over the Counter Medicine-** These are medicines you can buy without a doctor’s note or phone call. They are available at pharmacies, grocery stores and other stores in the community.
- ◆ **Supplements and Vitamins-** A supplement is something added to your diet to make you healthier. This includes vitamins, minerals and other items.
- ◆ **Herbs-** Herbs are often found at health food stores or in health food sections of stores. Herbs can be strong and interact with medicines. Tell your doctor and pharmacist if you use any herbs.

# Safety Tips for Seniors

Senior adults who take three or more medicines are at risk for having a problem with their medicines. Talk to your doctor and pharmacist about things you can do to stay safe.

As a senior adult, you are more sensitive to medicine than younger adults. Your body also may not get rid of medicines as quickly as when you were younger. If you take too much of a medicine, or a medicine interacts with another, it can cause health problems.

Call your doctor right away if you have any new health problems. This is true whether it is caused by medicine or not. The signs of having a problem with medicine can look like normal aging or other health problems.



Side effects can start right after you start a new medicine, or they can take a while to appear. Never assume a symptom is a sign of "getting old" - talk to your doctor.

Some side effects of medicine interactions are:

- ◆ Feeling tired, sleepy or less alert
- ◆ Constipation or diarrhea
- ◆ Leaking urine
- ◆ Not feeling hungry
- ◆ Feeling confused
- ◆ Falling
- ◆ Being depressed
- ◆ Losing interest in usual activities
- ◆ Feeling weak
- ◆ Shakiness or tremor
- ◆ Seeing or hearing things
- ◆ Feeling anxious
- ◆ Feeling dizzy
- ◆ Losing sexual feelings
- ◆ Developing a rash

Here are some tips to help you take medicine as safely as possible. Ask your doctor and pharmacist if you have any questions about your medicines.

- ◆ Take all your medicines to your doctor's office with you. Tell any doctor you see about everything you take.
- ◆ Take medicine just how your doctor tells you. Some medicines must be taken at certain times of the day or with food to work well.
- ◆ Take your entire prescription until it is gone. Stopping without talking to your doctor can be unsafe.

- ◆ In most cases, do not drink alcohol with any medicines. Check with your doctor and pharmacist about possible interactions.
- ◆ Only take a double-dose of medicine if told to by your doctor. A double dose is taking twice the amount of medicine you would normally take at



one time. For instance, taking two pills instead of one. Taking a double dose on your own can be unsafe. More is not always better.

- ◆ Take medicines with the lights turned on. Use your glasses if you have them.
- ◆ If you have arthritis, ask your pharmacist for an oversized, easy to open bottle. If you have trouble seeing, ask for a large-type label.
- ◆ Many medicines can make your skin sensitive to the sun. If yours does, wear a sunscreen, long sleeves, long pants and a wide-brimmed hat.

# Over the Counter Medicine

Just because you can buy medicine without a prescription does not mean it is safe. Some over the counter medicines are powerful and need to be taken with the same care as prescription medicines.

Understand these medicines as well as prescriptions you take. Let your doctor and pharmacist know of any over the counter medicines you use.

## Supplements, Vitamins and Herbs

Many people use supplements, vitamins and herbs. Some of these items can change the way a medicine works or make it not work as well. If you use any of these items, tell your doctor and pharmacist what you take. They can help you avoid any interactions with other medicines you take.



# Antibiotics

If your doctor gives you a prescription for an antibiotic, it is important to take the entire prescription, even after you feel better. You may feel better, but your infection is still there.

Taking the entire prescription reduces the chance that your infection will become resistant to antibiotics. This means the antibiotic wouldn't work on that infection anymore.

If you have a problem you believe is from an antibiotic, call your doctor's office. He or she can help you decide what to do.

When you go to the doctor, don't demand an antibiotic. If your problem is not caused by bacteria, an antibiotic will not work. And, with many bacterial infections, an antibiotic is not always needed.

# Taking Many Medicines

More than half of all senior adults don't take their medicines at the right times or take the right amount. This can be more difficult if a new medicine is added for a short time.



Many people keep track of their medicine schedule using a chart. Every time they take a medicine, they check it off on the chart. There is a sample medicine chart in the back of this booklet.

You can also use a pillbox that is divided into days of the week. When looking for a pillbox, think about what



suits your needs. Often a box with extra large boxes is helpful. You may have to ask your pharmacist to order one for you. You also have the option of a box that has one dose per day or up to four doses per day. Purchase the one that suits your medicine schedule.

Use an alarm wristwatch to help you remember your medicine if you are on a specific schedule.

To remember all your refills on time, see if your pharmacy has an e-mail reminder system. These can remind you when a prescription is due. If you know you refill a prescription at the same time every month, mark your calendar a year ahead on that date.

# Call Your Doctor

Call your doctor right away if you believe a medicine you are taking is causing a problem. Do not wait for your next office visit or wait for it to go away.



Telling your doctor any changes that may be caused by medicine is an important part of taking medicine safely. Your doctor wants you to call if you have a problem.

## Important

Don't take less medicine or stop taking a prescription medicine without talking to your doctor. Reducing or stopping some medicines suddenly can be unsafe. Work with your doctor if you think your medicines are causing you a problem.

# Your Doctor's Visit

Your doctor's visit is your time to learn about your health and safety. To get the most out of that time:

- ◆ Write down your questions for a few days before your office visit. Write down answers to your questions so you remember them.
- ◆ If you are learning something new, take someone with you to listen. A second set of ears can make a big difference.

When we get bad news, we don't hear much after that. If something life changing happens, make another office visit to come back and talk again. That gives you time to digest what you heard and write down questions.

- ◆ Use one pharmacy. Pharmacies keep track of likely drug interactions and let you know if they see a problem.
- ◆ Before leaving your doctor's office, read the prescription the doctor gave you. If you can't read it, the pharmacist may not be able to either. Ask for words to be printed that are unclear.

# Talking to Your Doctor

If you have a lot to discuss with your doctor when you make your office visit, tell the nurse or office staff you need a longer office visit to talk.

Ask questions if you do not understand something your doctor says. Sometimes asking your doctor to explain something using different words can help. Most doctors are happy to answer questions and understand how important it is for you to understand your care.



In the back of this booklet are sheets you can use to ask questions about your medicines.

# Storing Medicine

The bathroom may be the worst place to store medicine. Unless you are told differently, most medicines should be stored in a dry place, away from direct sunlight and extreme heat or cold. Only put medicines in your refrigerator if you are told to.

- ◆ Store medicines in their original bottles, tightly capped.
- ◆ If you use a daily or weekly pillbox, ask if your medicines can touch each other. Some medicines do not work well after they touch other medicines.
- ◆ Throw away outdated medicines.

## Common Medicine Interactions

An interaction is when a medicine you take or food you eat changes the way a medicine works. There are three kinds of drug interactions.

- ◆ **Drug/Drug Interaction-** This is when you take a medicine and it makes another medicine stronger, weaker or harmful. This includes interactions between prescribed medicines and over the counter medicines.



- ◆ **Drug/Food Interaction-** This is when food or supplements cause a medicine to be weaker, stronger or harmful.
- ◆ **Drug/Disease Interaction-** This is when a drug affects a disease that it was not supposed to affect. For instance, some medicines can cause high blood sugar. This would be a drug/disease interaction for someone who has diabetes.

## Drug/Drug Interaction

Common drug/drug interactions are:

- ◆ Taking two medicines that do the same thing, but have different names. An example is if you take medicine for anxiety or nerves and then take a sleeping pill. Both cause drowsiness and would make each other stronger.
- ◆ Taking two medicines that are the same, but have different names. Many medicines are made by more than one company. A single medicine can have several names, but they are all the exact same thing. This is where using one pharmacy can be helpful.
- ◆ Taking two medicines that do opposite things. For example, if you take a medicine to get rid of

water in your body and a medicine that causes you to hold water, they work against each other. You will not get the benefit of either medicine.

- ◆ Taking a medicine that changes the way another medicine acts. There are medicines that make other medicines weaker or stronger. Talking to your pharmacist will help you avoid these combinations.

## Drug/Food Interactions

Sometimes, foods you eat can change the way some medicines work. Some medicines need to be taken with food. Others can change the way a medicine is used in your body. You may be able to prevent this kind of interaction by taking your medicine 1 to 2 hours before eating.



The best place to learn about drug/food interactions for medicines you take is by talking to your pharmacist.

# Drug/Disease Interaction

Many senior adults have several health problems. This problem gets worse as we get older. Some common health problems seniors have are arthritis, osteoporosis (bone thinning), diabetes, high blood pressure and breathing problems. There are many medicines to help make these conditions better. However, sometimes a medicine to make one health problem better can make another health problem worse. Talk to your doctor about any changes in any of your health problems.

## You Have the Power

Working with your healthcare team, you can take medicines safely and live a better life. When used safely, medicines are wonderful, helping millions of people live fuller lives.

- ◆ Know what medicines you take and why.
- ◆ Talk to your healthcare team. Ask questions and let them know what medicines you take.
- ◆ Be active for your own health. If you have a problem, call your doctor right away.

In taking medicine safely, you have control.





# Your Personal Health Record

These pages are to record your personal health information. You can use it when visiting new doctors, hospitals or other healthcare providers to make sure your information is all correct.

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Home address \_\_\_\_\_

City \_\_\_\_\_ State \_\_\_\_\_

Zip \_\_\_\_\_ Home phone \_\_\_\_\_

**In case of emergency please call:**

\_\_\_\_\_

Relationship \_\_\_\_\_

Phone numbers \_\_\_\_\_

**Family practice doctor** \_\_\_\_\_

Doctor's phone number \_\_\_\_\_

**Specialty doctor** \_\_\_\_\_

Why you see him/her \_\_\_\_\_

Phone number \_\_\_\_\_

**Specialty doctor** \_\_\_\_\_

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**Pharmacy** \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

Pharmacy phone number \_\_\_\_\_

**Your health problems** \_\_\_\_\_

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**Your allergies to medicines** \_\_\_\_\_

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**Your allergies to other items** (dust, nuts, cats, etc.)

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**Your surgeries**

What was done

When

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**Special information about your health** \_\_\_\_\_

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Do you have a Durable Healthcare Power of Attorney?

Yes No If yes, where is it? \_\_\_\_\_

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Do you have a Living Will? Yes No

If yes, where is it? \_\_\_\_\_

# Your Medicines

Knowing about your medicines gives you the power to take them as safely as possible. On the next page, there are forms where you can record information about the medicines you take.

If you have trouble filling out these forms, your pharmacist may be able to help you. You can call your pharmacist and make an office visit to learn more about your medicines. They are often happy to help you with any questions.

**Name of medicine** \_\_\_\_\_

Why do you take this medicine? \_\_\_\_\_

How strong is the medicine? \_\_\_\_\_

If this is pills, how many do you take at one time? \_\_\_\_\_

What time or times do you take this medicine?

Does this medicine have any special instructions? If so, what are they? \_\_\_\_\_

What side effects do you need to watch for? \_\_\_\_\_

Do you take this medicine on an empty stomach or with food? \_\_\_\_\_

If you take it on an empty stomach, how soon can you eat after taking it? \_\_\_\_\_

Do you need to avoid any foods when taking this medicine? If yes, what? \_\_\_\_\_

Do any of your other medicines, vitamins, herbs or supplements interact with this medicine? If they can interact, what may happen? \_\_\_\_\_

What do you do if you miss a dose? \_\_\_\_\_

What is the name of the doctor who prescribed this medicine? \_\_\_\_\_

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What is the name of the doctor who prescribed this medicine? \_\_\_\_\_

# Questions for Your Doctor

Write down questions for your doctor here. Take this booklet with you to your office visit and make notes of the doctor's answers. Add paper if you have more questions that will not fit here.

Question

Answer



Question

Answer

Question

Answer



Question

Answer



Question

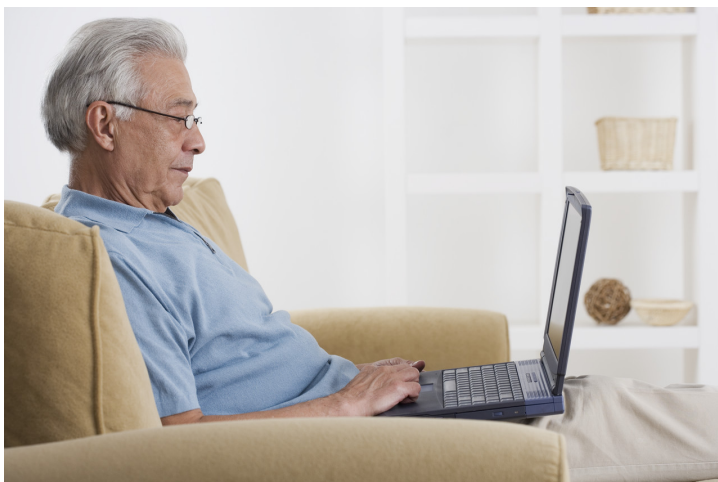
Answer

# Other Places to Find Information

There are several good places to find good information about medicines. Here are a few you can try. Don't forget your doctor and pharmacist are your best sources of information.

**Medline Plus.** This website offers facts about medicines, herbs and supplements by name.  
[www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/druginformation.html](http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/druginformation.html)

**DailyMed.** This website is offered by the Food and Drug Administration. You can access package inserts for hundreds of medications.  
[www.dailymed.nlm.nih.gov/dailymed/about.cfm](http://www.dailymed.nlm.nih.gov/dailymed/about.cfm)





**SafeMedication.com.** The American Society of Healthcare System Pharmacists sponsor this site that offers clear information about medicines and taking them safely. [www.safemedication.com](http://www.safemedication.com)

**AARP.** Go to this website and type “medication safety” into the search. You’ll get lists of great information about prescriptions, over the counter medicines, herbals, vitamins and more. [www.AARP.org](http://www.AARP.org)

# Sample Medication Chart

This chart can help you keep track when you take many medicines.

- ◆ Down the left side of the chart, write in the names of your medicines.
- ◆ Across the top, write in the times you take each medicine. You can use exact times, such as 7 a.m., Noon and 7 p.m. or you can use breakfast, lunch, dinner and bedtime.
- ◆ As you take each medicine, put an “x” through the time. This reminds you that you have taken that medicine for that time.
- ◆ Use one chart per day. They can be easily created on notebook or graph paper.

For example:

| Names of Medicines | Times Medicine is Taken |          |              |            |            |
|--------------------|-------------------------|----------|--------------|------------|------------|
|                    | Morning Time            | Day Time | Evening Time | Night Time | Other Time |
|                    |                         |          |              |            |            |
| Synthroid®         | Morning                 |          |              |            |            |
| Lipitor®           |                         |          | Evening      |            |            |



# Your Health and Medicines Record Pocket Card

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Home phone \_\_\_\_\_

Home address \_\_\_\_\_ City \_\_\_\_\_

State \_\_\_\_\_ Zip \_\_\_\_\_

Emergency Contact \_\_\_\_\_ Phone \_\_\_\_\_

Emergency Contact \_\_\_\_\_ Phone \_\_\_\_\_

Your Health Conditions

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Your allergies \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Your doctor \_\_\_\_\_ Doctor's phone number \_\_\_\_\_

Your pharmacy \_\_\_\_\_ Pharmacy Phone \_\_\_\_\_

**Tear out, fold and put in your purse or wallet.**

