

## Medication Safety

### Educate Before You Medicate!

It is very important for you to know about your medications in order to stay safe. You play an important role in making sure you get the best health care. Make it an active role!

1. Ask questions when you go to your doctor's office.
2. If he/she writes you a prescription, make sure you understand what the medicine is for and how to take it. Your pharmacist is also an excellent source of information about medications.
3. Remember, if there's something that you don't understand, ask, and follow these tips:
  - Keep an up-to-date list of all drugs you are taking (prescription, over-the-counter, vitamins, herbal). Keep this list in your purse or wallet and be sure the list matches what is in your chart at the doctor and in the computer at the pharmacy.
  - Have all your prescriptions filled at the same pharmacy every time. This makes it possible for them to check for drug interactions. Transferring prescriptions between pharmacies can be dangerous and is not recommended.
  - Make sure all your doctors (including dentist) and pharmacy have your medication allergies on file.
  - Bring all your medications to your doctor visit at least once per year. Include all medications you take (including prescriptions, over-the-counter, vitamins, and herbals).
  - Understand the conditions you are being treated for. Having knowledge about your diseases and how they are treated will help you understand the importance of your medicines and any other lifestyle changes you can make to improve your health.

Each time you get a new medication filled at the pharmacy, be sure your pharmacist has answered the following questions:

1. What is this medication used for?
2. How does this medication work?
3. How am I supposed to take the medication?
4. Should I take it with or without food?
5. What are the side effects of the medication?
6. Are there any drugs, dietary supplements, or natural medicines that interact with this medication?
7. Can I drink alcohol while taking this medication?
8. How long before I see the effects of this medication?
9. How long do I need to take this medication?
10. What do I do if I miss a dose?
11. How should this medication be stored?

**Polypharmacy:** Polypharmacy literally means "many drugs" and is a term that generally refers to the problems that can occur when a patient is taking more medications than are needed. This includes:

- Unwanted duplication of drugs (for example, taking 2 medications that contain acetaminophen (Tylenol). This could result in too much acetaminophen which is harmful to the liver).

- Drug interactions: the more medications a person takes the higher the risk for drug interactions and adverse effects.

Polypharmacy often results when patients go to multiple physicians or pharmacies.

- Always use the same pharmacy or the same pharmacy chain. This will allow the pharmacist to check for duplication or drug interactions.
- Have one main doctor that coordinates your care. This will allow the doctor to keep track of the different medications prescribed by other doctors or specialists.

### **Are you at risk for polypharmacy?**

Do you:

1. Take one or more prescription medication?
2. Take dietary supplements, vitamins, or over-the-counter drugs?
3. Take homeopathic remedies or herbal medicines?
4. Use different pharmacies to fill your prescriptions?
5. Have more than one doctor giving you prescriptions?
6. Take medicine more than once a day?
7. Have trouble opening medicine bottles?
8. Have poor eyesight or hearing?
9. Live alone?
10. Sometimes forget to take your medications?

If you answered **yes** to any of these, you may be at risk for polypharmacy. See your physician or pharmacist and request a complete medication review.

### **Top 10 Tips for Preventing Polypharmacy**

1. Always read labels. They may tip you off to possible drug interactions.
2. Use only one pharmacy to fill prescriptions.
3. Learn your medications by name and what they are for.
4. Make a list of all your medications including pill strength and dose, as well as herbal products, vitamins, homeopathic remedies, supplements and over-the-counter. Update it after every doctor visit.
5. Carry your medication list everywhere. Bring it to every doctor visit.
6. If you have more than one doctor, make sure each one knows what the other is prescribing.
7. Ask your primary caregiver or pharmacist to run your medication list through a drug interactions database to identify possible problems, especially if you're on five or more drugs.
8. Avoid combination products such as cold formulas. Ask your pharmacist to help you find a product just for the symptoms you're experiencing – not for every possible symptom.
9. Never take a drug without asking your pharmacist about its side effects and interactions with other drugs.
10. Get familiar with your medications. Learn about them from your physician or pharmacist. Don't trust the Internet entirely! Much of the information available online is from questionable sources.

Most importantly, take responsibility for your health by learning about your medications.

Source: <http://www.hap.org/prescriptions/safety.php>