



## Taking Medications Safely

When prescribed and taken appropriately, drugs have many benefits. However, medicines can also cause problems. It is especially important for seniors, who take more medicines and often have different medical and physical needs than younger people, to be aware of potential side effects from drugs, either alone or in combination with each other.

According to the National Institute on Aging, people age 65 and older consume more prescription and over-the-counter (OTC) medicines than any other age group. The average senior takes more than four prescription medications at once, plus two OTC medications.

In taking medication, drug interactions are probably the most serious risk. When two or more drugs are mixed in the body, they may interact with each other and produce uncomfortable or even dangerous side effects. Since seniors are much more likely to take more than one drug, this is an especially common problem for them.

When different drugs must be taken together to treat a specific condition, it is very important that a doctor prescribing any drug be aware of all the other drugs the patient is taking -- prescription and OTC. For example, a person who takes a blood-thinning medicine (by prescription) should probably not combine that with aspirin (OTC), which also thins the blood. Also, antacids (OTC) can interfere with the absorption of several prescription drugs.

Seniors tend to be more sensitive to drugs due to changes in organ function and, sometimes, loss of muscle tissue that can cause the drug to be more concentrated in the blood. Certain side effects can also be more dangerous for seniors, for example, a drop in blood pressure.

Here are some suggestions for how to keep safe while taking medicines:

- **Tell your doctor** and pharmacist about all the medicines you take, including prescription and non-prescription medicines, vitamins, and herbal supplements. If you have more than one doctor, make sure they all know what the others are prescribing, and get all your prescriptions filled at one pharmacy.

- **Follow directions. Read** the label every time you take the medication to prevent mistakes. Know whether to take a drug with or without (certain) food, and what to do if you miss a dose.
  
- **Keep track of** side effects. New symptoms may not be from old age, but from the drug you are taking. Tell your doctor immediately if you have an unexpected reaction to a new drug.
- **Periodically review your** drugs with your doctor – take them all with you when you see your doctor.
- **Don't forget to** take your medicines. Use a memory aid to help you, like a calendar, a pill box, or whatever system works best for you.

**For more information, visit:**

- “Tips to Help Seniors Reduce Medication Errors,”  
<http://doityourself.com/info/seniorsmedicineerror.htm>
- “Seniors – Managing Medications,” *Health Plus*, Vanderbilt University,  
<http://vanderbiltowc.wellspring.com/dh/content.asp?ID=1358>
- “Tips to Help Seniors Reduce Medication Errors,” *U.S. Pharmacist*  
[http://www.uspharmacist.com/index.asp?show=article&page=8\\_1240.htm](http://www.uspharmacist.com/index.asp?show=article&page=8_1240.htm)
- U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA), [www.fda.gov](http://www.fda.gov)

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