



Sensible medication use

A guide for seniors

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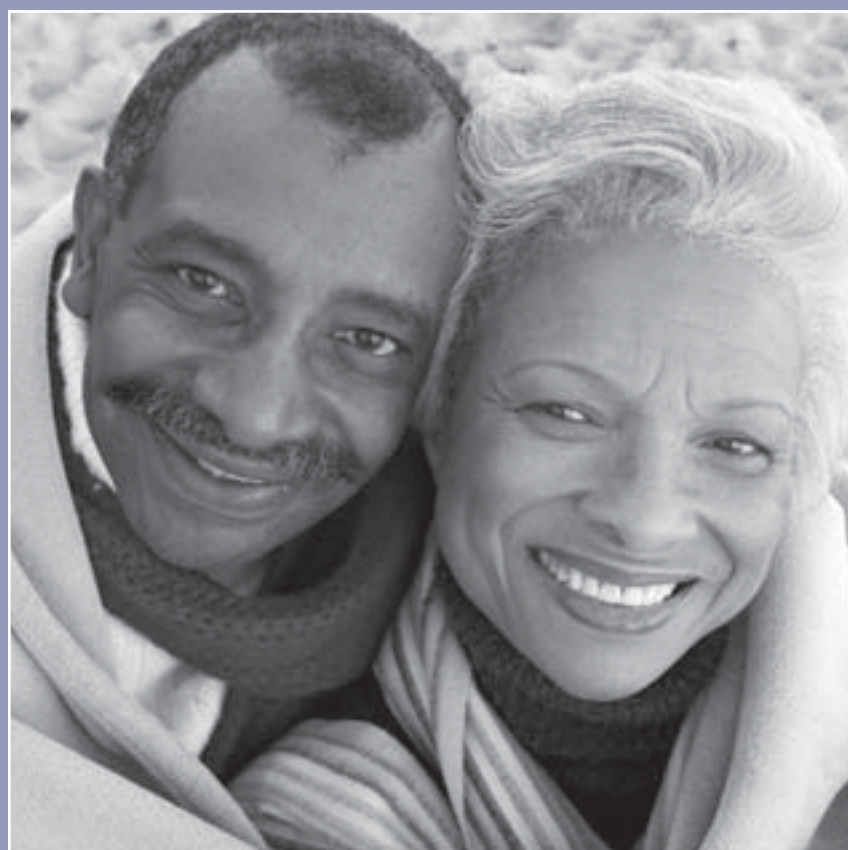


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Introduction

Seniors are a unique and growing segment of the population that has special medication needs, including:

- The need to take a number of medications at the same time
- Greater sensitivity to the effects of medications

Senior medication facts

United States health data indicates:

- More than 30 million people, or 12 percent of the population, are 65 or older.
- More than 80 percent of people age 65 and older take at least one medication, and almost half take three or more

In 2007, more than 90 percent of Americans age 65 and older had prescription drug coverage, compared to 75 percent in 2004.

The following pages offer tips on how to get information about medications and how to use them correctly. These are only suggestions and are not intended to replace directions and advice from your doctor or pharmacist.

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Sources: U.S. Census Bureau; University of Michigan News Service; National Center for Health Statistics

Growing older

Growing older causes a natural progression of physical changes that are sometimes difficult to distinguish from minor illnesses. Because these changes may not need medication or treatment, it's important to know how aging affects your response to medication.

Examples of physical changes associated with aging

- Indigestion and joint aches may become more common.
- You may notice changes in (or loss of) hearing, vision, smell, taste and muscle mass.
- Your blood pressure may rise.
- Your sleep patterns may change.
- You may begin to notice skin spots or discoloration.

Changes in response to medication

As your body ages, your response to medication changes. Your dosage may need to be adjusted, and some medications may need to be added or discontinued. Here are some examples of how the aging body responds to medication:

- Your blood flow slows, increasing the time it takes for medication to circulate in your body.
- The ability of your liver and kidneys to remove medication decreases, causing medication to stay in your body longer.

How can you play an active role in your medical care?

- See your doctor regularly to ensure that your health is monitored.
- Discuss any bodily changes with your doctor to decide whether medication therapy is needed, or whether your current medication regimen needs to be changed.

The medication list: your source for personal drug information

It's a good idea to make a list of all your medications and keep it with you in your wallet or purse. Having this list handy can save precious time during emergencies and hospitalizations.

- List all prescription drugs, over-the-counter drugs such as aspirin, nutritional supplements and vitamins, and all herbal products.
- Share the list with your doctors to help them decide which drugs to prescribe or which drugs to discontinue.
- The information on your medication list also helps doctors and pharmacists reduce your chances of having adverse drug interactions.

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Over-the-counter drugs are as important as prescription drugs

Over-the-counter drugs, also known as OTC drugs, and nutritional supplements are purchased without a prescription and can be an important part of your treatment. Remember to include OTC medications and nutritional supplements whenever a doctor or pharmacist asks you which drugs you are currently taking.

Follow these tips when using OTC medicines to treat pain:

- Talk to your doctor or pharmacist to avoid duplication when taking both OTC and prescription pain relievers.
- Ask your doctor or your pharmacist if OTC pain relief products are safe for use with your other medicines.
- Medication side-effects may occur when prescription drugs contain the same active ingredients as OTC pain relief products.
- When purchasing an OTC product, try the store brand, which usually is the least expensive and contains the same active ingredients.

How herbal products act in your body

Herbs are plants used in small amounts as spices and sometimes in larger amounts as remedies. Herbs are often referred to as “natural” and you may think they’re safe to use. But the safety, purity and effectiveness of herbs as remedies have not been established. In fact, a federal law classifies herbs as dietary supplements rather than OTC medicines. In addition, herbal products may interact with OTC and prescription medicines when taken together.

Here are some interesting facts about herbs:

- Herbal products are often composed of ingredients that have the same medicinal action as prescription drugs, but in unknown dosage amounts, so sometimes herbal products act in the body like prescription drugs do.
- Early prescription drugs were made from herbs, leaves, tree bark, rhizomes and seeds.
- Modern medicines that are derived from herbs include aspirin (from willow bark) and digitalis (from foxglove).

Remember, herbal products can change the way OTC and prescription medicines work in your body. Talk with your doctor or pharmacist about the safety of taking herbal products together with your other medicines.

Source: The Columbia Electronic Encyclopedia



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Visit your doctor regularly

Good communication is the key to an effective relationship with your doctor. Developing a relationship with your doctor can help you feel more comfortable sharing personal health information. It can also help you realize your long-term health goals.

Give your doctor the following information:

- Symptoms you have experienced and how long you've had them, including changes in eating, sleeping and bowel habits
- Prescription medications you are taking, especially those prescribed by another doctor or dentist
- Nonprescription medications or nutritional supplements you are taking, including vitamins, aspirin, herbal products and plant extracts
- All medications and nutritional supplements you are taking, and the doses and time of day that you take them
- Any side effects you are experiencing
- Any difficulty remembering to take your medication
- Allergies to medicines and foods
- Any difficulty you may have swallowing medication
- Medication refills you need
- Medication cost concerns



Ask your doctor:

- What medical problems do I have? Which medications are treating them?
- How long should I continue to take the medication? Does the dose need adjusting?
- Why is this new medication necessary? How much should I take?
- What are the generic and brand names of the new medication?
- What side effects may occur? What do I do if I experience a side effect?
- What is the best time of day to take the medication? Should this medication be taken with food?
- How can I tell if my medication is working properly?
- When should I return to the doctor's office?
- If you already take a lot of medicines, ask for medicines that can be taken only once or twice a day, to keep things simpler for you



Doctor visit quick tips

- **WRITE** down questions you have prior to your visit.
- **ASK** questions during your visit.
- **TALK** about your concerns.
- **REQUEST** written information about your visit to help you remember the discussion and the outcome.

Your pharmacist: a great source of information

Your pharmacist is also a good source of information about prescription and nonprescription medications. Getting your medications from a single pharmacy is as important as seeing the same doctor. It helps establish your medication history in one place and also helps prevent avoidable drug interactions.



Give your pharmacist the following information:

- Drug and food allergies, including latex
- The names of all prescription and nonprescription medications you take
- The names of nutritional and herbal supplements you take
- Any difficulty you have opening bottles
- Any difficulty you have swallowing medications

Ask your pharmacist these questions about each new medication:

- What is the name of the medication?
- How do I take it?
- What side effects may I experience? How can I avoid or decrease them?
- Do I need to take this with food?
- Are there foods or drinks I should avoid?
- Are there activities I should avoid, such as driving?
- Can I take this medication with my other prescription and nonprescription medications?
- What should I do if I miss a dose?
- How many refills do I have?
- Is a generic available? (Generic drugs reduce your copayment).
- Do you have a patient education sheet about this medication?

Check your prescription label and bottle for:

- Your correct name
- The correct pill. If the medicine looks different or doesn't seem right, talk to your pharmacist **before** taking it
- The correct name of the drug
- Clear directions for use
- Warning labels
- The number of refills

Also, be sure to read the information sheet that comes with your medicine.

Prevent or decrease medication side effects

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It's important to take your medication exactly as prescribed in order to prevent, cure or control health problems.

All medications can cause side effects; however, most side effects can be prevented or decreased. Side effects may include headache, dry cough, drowsiness, dizziness and upset stomach. Some side effects may disappear as your body adjusts to the medication, while others may last and become a cause for concern. In that case, your doctor may prescribe a different medication.

To be safe, promptly inform your doctor of any side effects you experience with your medication.

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Medication safety and storage tips

Here are a few quick tips to make sure you receive the maximum health benefits from your medication:

- Always take your medication exactly as prescribed by your doctor.
- Do not change the amount or discontinue your medication without your doctor's approval.
- Finish all medication, unless otherwise directed by your doctor.
- Never take someone else's medication.
- Read the label and directions each time you take a dose.
- Always keep prescription and nonprescription medication and nutritional supplements out of the reach of children.
- Discard medication that has expired. After the expiration date, medications can change chemically and become either ineffective or potentially harmful.
- Store medications in a cool dry place away from light. Sun, heat or moisture can significantly decrease a medication's effectiveness.
- Do not store medications in the bathroom.
- Changes in shape, size, color or odor (or softening, cracking, hardening or cloudiness of a liquid) are indications that a medication may no longer be safe.
- If you have any doubt about the safety or effectiveness of your medication, ask your pharmacist or doctor.

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Medication reminder tips



Remembering to take your medicine is a critical part of your health care regimen. It's easy to forget a dose, especially if you take more than one medication. Here are some tips to help you remember:

- Place your medication bottle near something you use or an activity you do daily, such as a water glass or cereal bowl.
- Take your medication at the same time every day, perhaps at the same time as a daily television show.
- Place the pills you will need each day in a pill container. One exception is nitroglycerin, which should only be stored in the original container. Ask your pharmacist which pills can be placed in a pill container.
- Make a list of your medications and the times to take each dose. Place a check on the list each time you take a dose.
- If you're concerned you'll forget to take the next dose, set an alarm or ask someone to remind you when it's time.
- Set a timer to turn on a light and don't turn it off until you've taken your medication.
- Post a reminder note in a strategic place, such as on the door you use to leave home, your bathroom mirror or on the dashboard of your car.

Be an active member of your health care team

It is important to work closely with your doctor, pharmacist and other health care providers to make your health care program effective.

- Get the most out of your medications and avoid potential problems by taking medicine appropriately.
- You can avoid or solve most medication problems — and create the best chance to achieve your health care goals — by communicating clearly and openly with your health care providers.

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