



Medication Safety Tips for Seniors

Did you know that at least one of every 10 elderly people is admitted to a hospital because of an adverse drug reaction?¹ Many seniors who take several medications at a time are especially vulnerable to the unintended effects of adverse drug reactions.²

Such undesirable effects can vary throughout the body, from changes in vision, hearing, balance, sleep, and mental alertness to digestion, bowel and bladder function, to the skin. To help prevent serious complications, even death, here are a few tips on taking medications safely.

- **Review your medication history.** Gather all the prescription, over-the-counter (OTC), vitamin, and herbal preparations that you take, and bring them to every doctor appointment. You also can print out your medication history from your personal health record at www.healthnet.com. Select *View Prescription Coverage > Manage Your Prescriptions > Printable Medication Card*. Keep an updated printout in your wallet to use as a discussion tool in all doctor appointments.
- **Talk to your doctor or pharmacist first.** Add OTC products to your medication schedule only after talking to your doctor or pharmacist. Many OTC medications including cold remedies, pain relievers, sleep aids,³ antacids, and even mineral supplements can cause adverse reactions or interact negatively with prescription medications.⁴
- **Don't wait!** Notify your doctor promptly of *any* adverse symptoms (stomach upset, diarrhea, difficulty urinating, constipation, forgetfulness, skin irritation, dizziness, etc.) that you experience, especially after starting any new medication.
- **Follow all directions.** Make sure you know each medication's: purpose; amount to take; best time to take it; whether to take it with or without food; and any storage requirements. Also know the potential side effects and what to do if they occur.
- **Use memory tips.** Reminder systems including a daily pillbox, calendar or chart will help ensure that you take medications as directed.
- **Take medications only as needed.** Some medications for short-term use treat certain symptoms that are expected to stop. If the symptoms persist, notify your doctor promptly.
- **Caution!** Read and follow all precautions on medication labels. They often are shown as illustrations on stickers.
- **Tell all doctors what the others have prescribed.** Make sure at least your primary doctor knows of any medications prescribed by other doctors or specialists, and vice versa.
- **Fewer pharmacies, fewer problems.** Try to fill as many prescriptions as possible at the same pharmacy or chain to better monitor any potential interactions and contraindications.
- **Keep introducing yourself.** Be careful upon admittance and discharge from a hospital, nursing home or emergency room. Make sure all the various health professionals know you, your medical history and your medication schedule. Request a full explanation, preferably in writing, of any change they make to your medications.
- **Beware of "drowsy" medications.** Some medications cause drowsiness and can increase the chance of falling down. Some examples include: Darvon, Darvocet-N, Fiorcet, Fiorinal, Doxepin, Valium, Benadryl, Atarax, Soma, Flexeril, and Robaxin. If you take any of these or their generic equivalent, ask your doctor if there are safer alternatives.

¹ Kongkaew, C. Noyce, P. Ashcroft, D. Hospital Admissions Associated With Adverse Drug Reactions: A Systematic Review of Prospective Observational Studies, *The Annals of Pharmacotherapy*, July, 2008, www.theannals.com, DOI 10.1345/aph.IL037

² Chutka, C. Takahashi, P. Hoel, W. Inappropriate Medications for Elderly Patients, *Mayo Clinic Proceedings*, 2004;79:122-139.

³ Chutka, C. Takahashi, P. Hoel, W. Inappropriate Medications for Elderly Patients, *Mayo Clinic Proceedings*, 2004;79:122-139.

⁴ Meadows, M. Medication Use and Older Adults, *FDA Consumer Magazine*, July-August 2006