

Medication Management and Safety: What You Need to Know

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The [NCPIE Coalition](#), working to promote safe medicine use, offers [resources for older adults and caregivers](#).

About [seven in 10](#) Americans take at least one prescription drug, according to Mayo Clinic and Olmsted Medical Center. Two in 10 people — many of them older than 65 years — take five or more medications. When you take several medications, it's easy to make mistakes. You may forget to take a dose, mix drugs that aren't compatible, or take too much. Medication errors lead to 700,000 emergency department visits each year, according to the [Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality](#).

Many medication errors are preventable. A few simple steps can help you avoid mistakes and ensure that you get the most benefit from all of your prescribed drugs.

Medication list

You're less likely to make drug errors if you keep an up-to-date list of your medications. Write down each medication you take, including prescription drugs, over-the-counter drugs, vitamins, minerals, and herbal supplements. For each drug, note the following information:

- the condition it treats
- its dosage
- directions for taking it
- side effects you've experienced
- your doctor's name and contact information
- the pharmacy name and phone number

Keep a copy of the list on file with your pharmacy and each doctor you see. Review the list periodically with your doctors and pharmacist. This can help you spot possible drug interactions and make sure that you still need each drug. You may also want to make a copy of the list and give it to a family member or other loved one so that they can provide that information to the emergency room or hospital in the event of a medical emergency.

Questions for your doctor

One of the best ways to avoid mistakes with your medications is to make sure you take them as directed. Read the package insert that comes with each drug and follow the directions carefully.

It's also helpful to ask your doctor or pharmacist these questions when they give you a new medication:

- How do I take it?
- How many times per day should I take it?
- Should I take it with food or on an empty stomach?
- Where should I store it? Does it need to be refrigerated?
- For how long will I need to take the drug?
- How will I know if it's working?
- What side effects can it cause? What should I do if I have side effects? What other
- medications, foods or drinks might interact with this drug? Do I need to schedule
- follow-up visits so the doctor can track my progress?

Medication reminders

With all you have to remember in a day, it's easy to miss a medication dose. Your medications won't work if you don't take them at the right times. Skipping your medications can increase your risk of disease complications, emergency room visits, and hospitalizations.

Here are some tips to help you remember to take your medication:

- Take the drugs at the same time each day. Try pairing your dose with an activity that you already do routinely, such as brushing your teeth or making breakfast.
Print out a calendar of your medication schedule. Post it where you'll see it every day, such as on
- the refrigerator or bathroom mirror.
- Download a smartphone app that will remind you when it's time to take your medication.
- Ask your pharmacist to call or email you when it's time to refill your prescriptions.

Traveling with medication

Before you head off for a trip, make sure all your prescriptions are up to date. Take enough medication to last for the entire trip, plus a few days' extra supply. If you're going overseas, bring the original prescription with you in case customs officials have questions. Keep all of your medications in their original containers with the labels that show your doctor's and pharmacy's names.

On domestic flights, you can bring an unlimited supply of pills or capsules. If you plan to bring liquid medicine in excess of the 3.4 ounce limit, let the TSA agent know before you go through screening. You'll need to remove the liquid medicine from your carry-on bag so that it can be screened separately.

Safe storage

Store medications in a cool, dry place. Keeping them on the bathroom counter or in the medicine cabinet isn't a good idea. The heat and moisture in a bathroom can cause the active ingredients in the drugs to break down. Instead, keep the drugs in a kitchen cabinet or bedroom drawer.

Always keep your medications in their original containers. If you have children in the house, keep your drugs locked away or in a cabinet that's hard for children to reach. Make sure the safety cap is firmly closed. If a child accidentally gets into your medicine, call Poison Control at 800-222-1222.

Disposing of unneeded and expired medication

Every few months, go through all of your medications and check the expiration dates. Throw out any drugs that have expired or that you no longer use.

Follow these steps to dispose of unused medications safely:

- Take the drugs to the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration's [National Prescription Drug Take-Back event](#) or a [public disposal location](#) in your area.
Call your local police or waste management department to see if they accept medication. Retail pharmacies, hospitals, and police stations may offer mail-in programs or drop boxes to help you dispose of your drugs safely.
- If your community doesn't offer a drug take-back program, mix the medicines with an inedible substance, such as dirt, coffee grounds, or kitty litter. Put the mixture in a sealed plastic bag or other container and throw it in the garbage.
- Certain medications — especially those that are likely to be abused — can be flushed down the toilet. The U.S Food and Drug Administration offers a [list of flushable drugs](#).



NCPIE focuses on medication safety issues like adherence, preventing abuse, reducing errors, and better communication.

Article resources

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