

## Learning Resource Guide

### Managing Medicines Safely

# ElderCare Online's Learning Resource Guide

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## Reader Notice

This publication discusses tips and techniques for caregiver to understand and cope with the challenges of caring for a loved one with any chronic condition that requires monitoring or in-home care. It is not a medical guide, even though it discusses prevalent medical conditions and treatments. For additional information, including diagnosis and treatment of Alzheimer's Disease, congestive heart failure, stroke or diabetes, contact your physician or other qualified medical professional. This document is for educational purposes only and should only be used in conjunction with sound medical advice from a professional.

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## Introduction

Using medicines properly concerns each of us personally. Misuse of prescriptions and over-the-counter drugs can lead to permanent damage and, in some cases, death. Although the medical and pharmaceutical professions also have major roles to play in improving our use of medicines, the greatest improvement can come from a better-educated public. In particular, no other group stands to gain as much from heightened awareness of drug use and potential abuse as do the elderly.

We live in a time when medical advances are happening faster than at any time in the past. Only ten years ago, less than half the medicines now in use were on the market. Partly because of the new drugs, more people live longer, they are healthier and they are far more independent than in past generations. Today's older people in particular benefit from the new medicines.

But with these benefits come risks. Drugs are powerful substances – and if they're not used carefully, the consequences can be serious. Drugs can affect different people in different ways. People can sometimes forget whether or not they took a medicine. They might have trouble keeping track of what to take and when. Because elderly people generally take more medicines than anyone else, they naturally run a greater risk of having problems with drugs.

These risks can be avoided. If you and your loved one know how to prepare for a visit to your doctor, what questions to ask, how to take medicines, and what side effects to watch out for, you can cut down the risks of having bad reactions. The information in this booklet can help you do all these things. Other Learning Resource Guides and workbooks are published by ElderCare Online and available on the website at <http://www.ec-online.net>.

## What You Should Know About Your Medicines

One of the most effective weapons against problems with medicines is to get all the facts. Here's what you should know about each medicine you take:

**Name.** Know either the brand name or the generic name.

**Purpose.** Find out what the drug is for and how it is supposed to help. Should it reduce pain or fever? Should it lower blood pressure or cure infection?

**How and when to take it.** Find out when and how often you should take the medication. Should you take it before, with, or after meals? Should you take it at bedtime? If it is prescribed "as needed" what does that mean? What should you do if you miss a dose?

**How long to take it.** Many medicines need to be finished completely or continued for several days even though you or your loved one feels better. Stopping a medicine too soon may not allow it to work completely, resulting in a relapse or flare-up of the original problem. Other medicine is intended only for a short time and should not be continually refilled unless necessary.

**What to expect.** Know what results to expect from the medicine and what to do if these results do not occur.

**How quickly it will work.** Find out how long it should take for the medicine to work. Some medicines act quickly, for example, nitroglycerin for angina (chest pain). Other medicines take time to work; for example, antidepressants may take four weeks or longer to be effective and some drugs for arthritis may take several weeks to ease pain.

**Can the medicine be crushed.** If you or your loved one has trouble swallowing pills, you may ask the doctor or pharmacist if the medicine can be crushed and taken in a soft food such as apple sauce.

**Possible side effects.** Any medicine can have side effects. Side effects may be of no clinical significance, for example, a change in the color of urine or loose bowel movements; or they may be serious, for example, dizziness, sexual dysfunction, memory problems, or depression. Ask your doctor:

- ?? What are possible side effects I should be aware of?
- ?? What should I do if side effects or unexpected reactions occur?
- ?? When should I call you about side effects?

**Cautions and warnings.** Know any cautions you or your loved one should observe while taking the medicine. Ask your doctor:

- ?? What foods, beverages, or other medicines should be avoided while taking this medicine?
- ?? Should alcohol be avoided?
- ?? Are there activities that should be avoided? For example, should driving a vehicle, operating machinery, or exposure to the sun be avoided?

Ask your doctor or pharmacist questions. If you or your loved one don't understand how or why to take the medicine, a serious mistake could be made. If you're not sure about directions, ask your pharmacist or doctor rather than guessing. If you have difficulty hearing or remembering instructions, ask your doctor or pharmacist to write them down. Many prescription drugs come with printed information. Ask your pharmacist if an information sheet is available for your medication.

## Helping Your Doctor Help You and Your Loved One

Doctors and patients are partners. The doctor depends on the patient for basic information. And the doctor's advice is good only if the patient follows it. As soon as you or your loved one leave the doctor's office, you are in charge of obtaining the medicines, taking them according to instructions and paying attention to the results. You and your loved one have a need – and a right – to know how to do this properly.

As a patient or caregiver you wear two hats. First, you are a person seeking help because either you or a loved one is sick. Your task here is to tell the doctor what he or she needs to know and submit to examination. Second, as the person who must manage your own and a loved one's health care plan, you must learn as much as you can about your state of health and the state of health of the person you are caring for. If you do not get full, clear instructions, the best medical opinion may be of little help.

Unfortunately, a visit to the doctor may end with the patient or caregiver not really understanding what to do. What can you do to guarantee that you get good instructions? To answer this, let's look at what often goes wrong when you visit the doctor, what can be done about it, and what information you should have when you leave.

### What Can Go Wrong?

In the doctor's office, you or your loved one may be anxious and may feel ill and weak. You are examined and questioned, often by a stranger asking intimate questions. The doctor may seem too busy or impersonal; his or her tests may cause pain or embarrassment. Several other people may be waiting to see the doctor. The office itself may be uncomfortable. Seeing a doctor may be something new to you or your loved one and you may be uncertain about what to ask, how to ask it, and how the doctor will respond.

Many of the questions you want to ask might never quite come up. This is understandable. The relief we feel at having an expert take care of us might make us forget that in the weeks and months to come, we will be responsible for taking our own medicines. We may not realize how important it is to know about these medicines so we can avoid any risks.

Does this sound discouraging? You can do something to improve things. Be prepared to provide your doctor with complete and accurate information. Before your appointment, make a list of the following:

- ?? Symptoms. Describe the symptoms you or your loved one have experienced – for example, changes in sleep or bowel habits, headaches, pain or fatigue. Be clear, specific and concise. This helps the doctor make a proper diagnosis and determine the best treatment.
- ?? Allergies. List any allergies and reactions you or your loved one has to foods and other substances.
- ?? Adverse medication reactions. List all medicines you or your loved one have had negative reactions to, describe the specific reaction and when it occurred.
- ?? All medicines you or your loved one are taking. Write down the names of all medicines you or your loved one take, including those bought without a prescription – such as aspirin, cold remedies, antacids and laxatives-and those prescribed by other doctors. Doctors need to know about over-the-counter medicines because some can significantly impact the effectiveness of prescription medicines. Every doctor you or your loved one sees needs to know all of the medicines that are being taken. Without this information, a doctor may prescribe a medicine that is similar to one already being taken, which could result in a double dose-or a medicine that may interact dangerously or cancel the effects of another medicine.

- ?? Other medicinal preparations. Share information about substances such as herbs, vitamin or mineral supplements, extracts, and bee pollen that you or your loved one are taking. Tell your doctor the amount and frequency with which you or your loved one take such preparations.
- ?? Caffeine and alcohol consumption. List the amount of coffee, tea, soft drinks and alcohol you or your loved one drink in an average day.
- ?? Smoking habits. Write down the number of cigarettes, cigars, or pipes you or your loved one smoke daily (or the amount of tobacco you or your loved one chew).

## **The Visit to the Doctor's Office**

### **Make a list of questions to ask the doctor.**

If the doctor does not have time to answer your questions, ask who in the office can. Answering your questions is part of the doctor's responsibility.

By the end of the visit, you and your loved one should get instructions from the doctor for properly taking any medicines prescribed. Before leaving the office, you should know the answers to these questions for each drug prescribed for you or your loved one:

- ?? What am I or my loved one taking?
- ?? When and how often should the medicine be taken? Under what circumstances – before, with, after, or between meals? At bedtime? As needed?
- ?? How long should the medicine be taken?
- ?? Will there be any side effects? Should they be reported?

### **Be sure you understand what the doctor tells you.**

Tell the doctor if you do not understand any terms used or instructions given. No question that you have is a dumb question. You have a right to information about your health and the health of your loved one and prescription drugs in language you can understand. If you have difficulty hearing, or if language is a barrier, arrange for someone to go with you or have the doctor put explanations and instructions in writing.

Keep a medicine chart. (See page 15). Take the chart with you when you visit the doctor. Ask questions about the medication's purpose, side effects, dosage, description and special instructions so that you can fill in information about each medicine.

**Tell the doctor if you think you or your loved one may have problems taking a medicine.** If you think you or your loved one will not be able to take a medicine as directed, say so and be specific about the reason it will be difficult.

- ?? Is cost of medicine a problem? Ask if a less expensive and equally effective generic drug is available.
- ?? Is the schedule for taking the medicine too complicated? If so, perhaps the doctor can prescribe an equally effective medicine that can be taken once a day instead of three times a day.
- ?? Do you feel you should be able to solve your own or your loved ones health problems, for example, depression, without taking drugs? If so, explain this so the doctor can explain the advantages or disadvantages of the medicine.
- ?? Do you think you or your loved one will have difficulty actually taking the medicine – swallowing the pills, giving yourself or your loved one an injection (for example, insulin), putting drops in your own or your loved ones eyes, or inserting a suppository?

The better the information you share, the more it can help your doctor to prescribe medicine that will work for you or your loved one and the condition being treated.



## Working With Your Pharmacist

Your pharmacist is the best person to talk to about all of your own and your loved ones medicines. A pharmacist can do the following:

**Provide reliable information on all medicines.** The pharmacist is an expert on both prescription and over-the-counter medicines. The pharmacist is knowledgeable about possible side effects, drug interactions and how to properly use medicines.

**Verify what your doctor said.** Perhaps you did not get enough information or are not completely clear about what the doctor told you about a medicine. Your pharmacist can verify what your doctor said and answer your questions.

**Monitor the medicines you or your loved one takes.** It is important to always use the same pharmacy. If you or your loved one are a regular customer, the pharmacy may keep a record of the medicines you or your loved one purchase or a complete patient medication profile.

**Keep your own patient medication profile.** A patient medication profile like the ElderCare Medical Planner. It is used to track an individual's medicine and allergy history, medical conditions that need to be considered, and all the medicines (prescriptions and over-the-counter) you or your loved one take. The ElderCare Medical Planner is an essential tool because it:

- ?? Serves as a check against taking medicines that you or your loved one might be allergic to.
- ?? Reduces the possibility of taking a medicine, which you're own or your loved ones medical history indicates is not appropriate.
- ?? Helps prevent undesirable drug interactions, especially when you or your loved one are taking medicines prescribed by more than one doctor.
- ?? Enables the pharmacist to alert you and your doctor to potential problems with medicines.
- ?? Enables the pharmacist to better monitor whether you or your loved one is taking the medicines properly and remind you when you or your loved one needs a prescription refill.
- ?? Enables the pharmacist to better advise you or your loved one about over-the-counter medicine.

Buying all medicines from one pharmacy that maintains a patient profile for customers can help prevent medication problems. Choose one pharmacy that you like and stick with it. To select a pharmacy, ask these questions:

- ?? Do you keep patient profiles?
- ?? How is the patient profile used? Some pharmacies keep records primarily for payment and tax purposes; others keep records that are more complete. Choose a pharmacy that uses the profile to screen for possible drug interactions and allergies.
- ?? When is the patient profile checked? Choose a pharmacy that checks your own or your loved ones record for potential drug interactions each time you fill a prescription.

In addition, choose a pharmacy where the pharmacists take time to explain each medicine to you and answer your questions. Some pharmacies have designed a special area you can privately discuss questions or concerns you have about your own or your loved one's medicines.

If you move or change pharmacies, request a copy of your own or your loved one's profile. This could be helpful to the new pharmacist-and a new doctor. The ElderCare Medical Planner is portable, private and not stored on a corporate computer.

## Taking Medicines Safely

The federal government takes precautions to ensure that medicines available to us are safe and effective. Doctors and pharmacists can help. But ultimately, each one of us is responsible for how we take our medicines. Here's what you can do to ensure you or your loved one are taking medicines safely:

**Take medicine in its original form.** Never crush pills or open capsules to make them easier to swallow, unless approved by a health care professional. Changing the form of medicine may alter its stability and absorption. Some medications are coated to protect them from gastric enzymes or to protect the stomach from drug irritation; if crushed or broken, they may not work as intended.

Drug overdose can result from changing the form of medicines. Some medicines are designed with multiple coatings of time-release beads that permit slow absorption of the medicine. When time release capsules are crushed, a greater than normal amount of the medicine is released, and overdose or intense side effects can occur.

**Take medicines with water.** Water is the best beverage for taking medicines. Drink a full glass.

- ?? Do not mix medicines into hot drinks. Hot temperatures can destroy the effectiveness of certain drugs.
- ?? Do not swallow medicine with alcohol. Alcohol can dissolve coatings on time-released tablets and capsules, causing too much medication to be released too soon. Drinking even a small amount of alcohol with certain medicines can greatly increase the depressant effect on the brain. Mixing alcohol and some medicines may cause excessive drowsiness, coma or death. Drinking alcohol is particularly dangerous with the following medicines:
  - ?? Antihistamines
  - ?? Tranquilizers, sedatives or barbiturates
  - ?? Antidepressants
  - ?? Pain medication

**Do not mix medicines with food.** For example, do not crush a pill and put it in your applesauce, unless your doctor or pharmacist approves. Although it may be easier to take a medicine mixed with food, it may alter a medication's effectiveness. If you are given approval to mix a medicine with food, mix only one dose at a time just before your loved one takes it.

**Read the label before taking medicine.** Make sure you or your loved one is taking the right medicine before taking it. Get into the habit of verifying the name of the label, not just the shape or color of the container.

- ?? Never take medicines in the dark, no matter how sure you or your loved one is about the location. Turn on the light and read the label.
- ?? If you or your loved one wear glasses, make sure they are on before taking the medication.
- ?? If the print on labels is too small, ask the pharmacist to write instructions in large print.

**Discard medicines that are old or have changed.** Don't take any medicine that is expired, decayed or changed, in an unlabeled container or no longer needed. Throw it out. Medicines do not last indefinitely. Manufacturers conduct tests to determine the length of time a given drug stays active and can be stored safely. The expiration date is valid only if a medicine has been stored properly. Medicine, which has changed in color or odor, is crumbly, or appears

different in any way may be toxic or have lost its effectiveness. An expiration date is on all prescription and over-the-counter labels.

**Keep an up-to-date medication record.** This should include all prescription and over-the-counter medicines, their dosages, and how long you or your loved one have taken them. Share this record with your doctors. This is particularly important if you or your loved one see more than one doctor. This record helps your doctors prescribe medicine that won't interact badly with another. Use the ElderCare Medical Planner to occasionally review your loved one's need for medicine with the doctor.

### **Prescription Medicine**

The use of some medicines must be closely monitored and controlled. You should keep the doctor informed about all health conditions and follow prescription instructions carefully.

**Take medicines as directed.** If you do not follow the instructions exactly, your own or your loved one's medicines may not work properly.

- ?? Don't change the dosage or schedule without checking with the doctor. Increasing or decreasing a dosage or taking a medicine more or less often than prescribed can seriously reduce its effectiveness. "More is better" does not apply to medicines.
- ?? If you or your loved one misses a dose, don't take a double dose to make up for it.
- ?? Don't try to save medicine. Take medicine as prescribed to protect your own or your loved ones health; it is far less expensive than hospitalization.

**Tell the doctor if you or your loved one didn't have a prescription filled or didn't take the prescribed dosage.** Otherwise, the doctor may think the treatment is not working and prescribe another medicine – which may be less effective or have more side effects than the original medicine-when the problem is that the medicine was not taken as directed. Keep a record of any doses that are missed and share this with the doctor.

**Take medicine until the doctor tells you or your loved one to stop.** Even if the symptoms have disappeared and you or your loved one feel better, continue taking the medicine as directed until it is gone. If you or your loved one stop taking it too soon, the symptoms may return or worsen. If you feel the medicine is not doing what the doctor said it would do, or if it seems to be causing more harm than good, call the doctor.

**Take medicines prescribed only for you.** Sharing prescription medicines is dangerous. Never take medicine prescribed for someone else or lend medicines to others. Even though symptoms appear to be the same, you or your loved one may be suffering from an entirely different problem. Prescriptions are written based on a person's health problem, physical condition, age, and weight. What is safe and effective for one person may produce side effects, no relief or a severe reaction for another person.

**Know what the prescription label information means.** Labels provide information about how to use medicine. But, sometimes instructions may not be clear or correctly understood. For example, do you or your loved one know what these instructions mean?

- ?? Take as directed. What were the directions?
- ?? Take three times a day. Around the clock or during waking hours? Do you take at specific times evenly spaced, such as 7 A.M., 3 P.M., and 11P.M. or do you just take three doses any time during the day?
- ?? Take as needed. As needed for what? What determines need? Headache, back pain, or... Does as needed for pain mean severe pain or should you take it for minor discomfort?

- ?? Take two tablets daily. When? Morning or afternoon, or one in the morning and one in the afternoon?
- ?? Take before bedtime. Immediately before bed or 1-2 hours before?
- ?? Take before meals. Immediately before meals or 1-2 hours before?

If instructions seem vague, ask your pharmacist for advice about when and how to take the medicine.

**Carry a medication record card in your own and your loved ones wallet.** The card should list important facts about health, such as health problems, medicines taken and drugs to which you or your loved one are allergic. It could save your own or your loved ones life! The information is helpful if you or your loved one are involved in an accident, faint, black out or are away from home and require medicine. Emergency staff can provide better treatment if they have this information.

Wear an emergency medical identification bracelet or chain if you or your loved one are allergic to a medicine or other substances (for example, bee venom), or if you or your loved one have a medical condition, such as diabetes, that affects treatment in an emergency. Contact your pharmacist or Medic Alert (1-800-432-5378) for an emergency medical identification to keep with you or your loved one at all times.

**Do not ask the pharmacist for unprescribed refills.** Refrain from asking your pharmacist to refill a prescription without consulting with the doctor first. A pharmacist is legally obligated to only dispense medicine prescribed by a medical doctor. Some medicines are habit forming; others should not be taken for extended periods of time. Generally, automatic refills should be avoided. Your own and your loved ones medication should be reevaluated at regular intervals.

### **Over-the-Counter Medicine**

Give as much care to taking over-the-counter medicine as you give taking prescription medicines. Over-the-counter medicine differs from prescribed medicine in that the active ingredients, mix of ingredients, and recommended dose are considered relatively safe.

If taken in large doses, some over-the-counter medicines are equal in strength to prescription medicines. Some medicine that formally required a prescription is now available over-the-counter. For example, the pain reliever ibuprofen is now a common ingredient in many over-the-counter medications.

Don't use any over-the-counter drug longer than recommended on the label without first checking with the doctor or pharmacist.

Just because a medicine can be purchased without a prescription does not mean it is 100 percent safe. Over-the-counter medicines can create problems in these ways:

- ?? Change the effect of prescribed medicines. Over-the-counter medicine may make a prescribed medicine either stronger or less effective. As a result, the doctor, unaware that you are taking over-the-counter medicines, may mistakenly decrease or increase the dosage of the prescribed medicine.
- ?? Mask symptoms of disease. Antacids, for example, taken for an upset stomach may cover up warning symptoms of ulcers and delay diagnosis and treatment.
- ?? Lead to overdose. An over-the-counter medicine can have effects similar to a prescribed medicine. Combined, the medications may lead to drug overdose.
- ?? Alter normal body function. Habitual use of laxatives and enemas, for example, can decrease normal bowel functions.

- ?? Aggravate existing health problems. For example, antacids may produce magnesium toxicity in some patients with kidney problems. Some antacids contain large amounts of sodium (for example, Alka Seltzer and Bromo Seltzer), and should not be taken by people on low sodium diets because it may alter their blood pressure.

**Read the label on the package.** Labels for over-the-counter medicines have detailed information. Reading and understanding product labels is critical to using over-the-counter medicines safely. It's especially important to read labels carefully if you have a special health problem or are on a special diet. For instance:

- ?? If you or your loved one have high blood pressure or diabetes, you should not take decongestants unless prescribed by a doctor.
- ?? If you or your loved one have high blood pressure, or are on a low sodium or salt-free diet, you should avoid products containing sodium bicarbonate (a common antacid) or other forms of sodium. Labels provide ingredient information and may indicate whether a product is considered salt-free or low in sodium.

Read the label before purchasing an over-the-counter medicine so you are sure it is safe for you or your loved one.

Read the label even if you have purchased the product before because ingredients change. New warnings are sometimes added. Watch for label banners or flags indicating a significant product change. Be sure you understand the following:

- ?? Indications for use. Is the drug meant to be used in the way you plan to use it?
- ?? Ingredients. Does the product contain anything you or your loved one should avoid? What are the active and inactive ingredients? What do they do?
- ?? Are you or your loved one allergic to any of the ingredients?
- ?? Are you or your loved one sensitive to any ingredients because of a chronic health condition?
- ?? If you or your loved one are on a low-salt diet, what is the sodium content?
- ?? If you or your loved one are on a low-sugar diet, what is the sugar content?
- ?? Warnings. What are the product warnings?
- ?? Who should not take the medicine?
- ?? Should you or your loved one use it for a short time only?
- ?? Are you or your loved one currently taking any medicine that the medication should not be taken with?
- ?? Are there any foods or beverages you or your loved one should avoid while taking the medication?
- ?? Are there any circumstances under which a person should see a doctor before taking the medicine?
- ?? What are the symptoms that indicate the medication should be discontinued?
- ?? When should a doctor be consulted if symptoms persist?
- ?? Directions: What are the directions for taking the medicine?
- ?? What is the appropriate dose?
- ?? How often should it be taken?
- ?? How long should it be taken?
- ?? How should it be taken?
- ?? Cautions: What should you or your loved one be cautious about with this product?
- ?? Are there any activities you or your loved one should avoid while taking the medicine (for example, driving, drinking alcoholic beverages)?
- ?? Can you or your loved one follow the cautions?
- ?? What should you or your loved one do in the case of an overdose?
- ?? What are possible side effects? What side effects might you or your loved one expect?
- ?? When does the medicine expire? After what date should you or your loved one no longer use the medicine?

Most over-the-counter medicines have tamper-resistant packaging and carry information about how to check for evidence of tampering. Do not take the medicine if packaging or contents are not intact or look questionable.

### **Generic Medicine**

Your pharmacist can also help you and your loved one decide whether to use a less expensive generic drug instead of a brand-name drug. A generic name is the name given when a new medicine is invented. It's the medicine's official name. A brand name is the name a company gives a drug for marketing purposes. Examples of generic and brand name medicines are:

GENERIC	BRAND
Aspirin	Bayer, Bufferin, Anacin
Diazepam	Valium
Acetaminopen	Tylenol

A generically equivalent medicine is usually less expensive. Because of the costs that drug companies incur in developing advertising and promoting their products, brand name medicines are generally higher in price than products sold under the generic name.

Both brand name and generic medicines must meet standards and be approved by the United States Food and Drug Administration. A generically equivalent drug has the same active ingredients, strength and dosage as its brand name counterpart. Before switching to a generic medicine, check with your doctor or pharmacist.

Not all drugs are available in generic form. After developing a new medicine, a company receives a patent on it that lasts for 17 years. During this time, no other company can manufacture it and it is not available in generic form. Ask your doctor or pharmacist to see if a generic drug is available.

## Storing Medicines

How you and your loved one store your medicines is important. Improper storage can cause medicines to lose their strength, disintegrate or even become dangerous because of chemical changes. Three common mistakes are:

- ?? Putting medicines on windowsills
- ?? Keeping medicine in the bathroom
- ?? Mixing medicines together in one container

Here's how to safely store your medicines:

**Store medicines in a cool, dark, dry place (unless otherwise instructed).** Most medicines should be stored between 50-68 degrees F. Higher or lower temperatures, as well as light and humidity, can alter the effectiveness of medicines. Store medicines on a shelf in a hall or bedroom closet, or in a kitchen cabinet that is not close to the oven or stove, and is out of the reach of children, in a locked container.

Do not store medicine on windowsills, in the bathroom, near heat-producing surfaces or appliances, or in the car. Despite its name, the bathroom medicine cabinet is one of the worst places for medicine because of heat and moisture. Do not store medicine in the refrigerator unless instructed to do so. Auxiliary labels tell you if refrigeration or other special storage is required. If you or your loved one are not sure about how or where to keep a medication ask your pharmacist.

**Keep medicines in original labeled containers.** Medicines are dispensed in containers designed to protect the drug. For example, brown containers are used for light-sensitive medicines, and glass containers are used for medicines which can be absorbed by plastics (for example, nitroglycerin tablets).

The label on the original container provides important information. Intact labels ensure you or your loved one know which medicine is in which container and in an emergency, that medical personnel can quickly identify them.

Use the rule of "keeping medicines in original containers" when you or your loved one travel. Ask your pharmacist for smaller containers, with labels for your medicines. A decorative plastic or metal pillbox or travel case may be unsuitable or may be dangerous because it is unlabeled. Before using a commercial pill container, talk with the pharmacist about the best container. Many people have trouble opening child-proof bottle caps. You may have this problem. If so, ask your pharmacist to substitute an easy-to-open cap for you. Most pharmacies carry both kinds of bottle caps and will gladly substitute, if you ask.

**Store medicine out of the reach of children and pets.** A major cause of accidental poisoning is young children taking a parent's or grandparent's medicine. All medicines should be stored out of children's reach. Childproof safety caps on medicine and a locked cabinet are best. A locking tackle or toolbox works well.

**Keep medicine containers tightly closed.** Caps on medicine containers are designed to protect against moisture.

- ?? Check your own or your loved ones medicine storage area regularly. Flush medicines down the toilet that are expired, altered in some way, in containers without labels, or no longer needed. Throw empty containers, not medicines, into the garbage.
- ?? Store medicines in their original, labeled containers, in a place protected from light, humidity and heat.



## Keeping Track Of Taking Medicines

To get the most benefit and reduce risks from your own or your loved ones medicine, it must be taken as directed. Sometimes this is difficult, particularly if you or your loved one are taking several medicines daily, at different times and with different instructions.

An organizer system can make keeping track of medicines easier and ensure that you or your loved one take the right medicine at the right time. There are a variety of organizer systems that you can make or buy. Having a system that works for you or your loved one is what counts.

### **Medicine Chart**

A medicine chart is a basic guide to your own or your loved one's medicine use. It usually includes the following information:

- ?? Drug Name (what it is called)
- ?? Purpose (what it is for)
- ?? Description (color, shape. Other identifying features)
- ?? Directions (when and how it should be taken)
- ?? Special instructions (other pertinent information, possible side effects, or precautions)

A large sheet of paper may be used to make a poster-sized chart and smaller sheet to make a chart you or your loved one can carry with you when you visit the doctor or pharmacist, or are away from home. If the shape, size, colors, or when and how you or your loved one should take the medicine changes, correct the description on the medicine chart.

The ElderCare Medical Planner (available from <http://www.ec-online.net>) includes a medication chart and other resources to help you manage medications and your relationship with your health care providers.

### **Weekly Check-Off For Medications**

A check-off chart can be used to guide and document the medicine schedule. To make one, use 8 ½ x 11- inch ruled paper. Starting from the right side, mark off seven ¾ inch columns. Label these columns for days of the week, starting with Sunday. In the column to the left of the day columns, list the name and dosage for each medicine, and the time to be taken. Each time you or your loved one take a medicine, check it off on the chart. You may want to make photocopies of the chart.

### **Color-Coded System**

A coding system, used in combination with a medicine chart or check-off chart, can be particularly useful if you or your loved one have difficulty reading prescription labels. Use colored self-adhesive labels or colored markers to code the labels of the medicine containers. Put a color mark by the name of the medicine on the chart that matches the color mark on the label of that medicine's container. (If you or your loved one take more than five or six medicines, you may want to use letters of the alphabet instead of colors.) Consider these suggestions

- ?? Use colors that are distinctly different from one another. (To some older people, dark green, navy blue and black look the same.)
- ?? Make sure you or your loved one can see the color clearly, but do not obscure label information.
- ?? Be sure to mark the medication containers, not the caps. Caps may be returned to the wrong containers
- ?? When refilling a prescription, be sure to give the new medicine its proper color code.



## **Calendars**

Calendars can help remind you or your loved one to take medication. If you or your loved one take medicine only once a day, consider using a daily tear-off calendar. Tear off the dated page after the medicine is taken.

If you or your loved one take multiple medicines, a calendar with large squares may be helpful. Mark on each day when medicine is to be taken. Each time you or your loved one take a medication, check it off in the square.

## **Envelope Systems**

An envelope system can be particularly useful if it is difficult for you or your loved one to open bottles or read medication labels. There are two types of envelope systems:

- ?? System One. Put each medicine in a separate envelope. Write the name of the medication, dosage, and times to take it on the envelope.
- ?? System Two. Put a day's worth of pills into one envelope. Label each envelope with the day of the week, the dosage of each medicine, and when to take it.

## **Container Systems**

A container system works best if you or your loved one take the same pills in the same dosages every day and if it is easy to tell the difference between the pills. An egg carton works well to make a daily system. For example:

1. Label each of the 12 slots for hours of the day.
2. Put the pills into the appropriate slots each morning.
3. Take pills that are in the 8 A.M. slot at that time, and so on.

An egg carton also can be used to make a weekly system:

1. Label seven of the slots according to the day the pill is to be taken.
2. Put the medicine for one day in each of the slots.
3. Write on the inside of the carton lid the time when each pill is to be taken.

Commercial medication containers are available for multiple and single dosages by the day or the week. You, or a friend or relative, can fill the container for a week and then you or your loved one can take the medicines at the specified times. Ask your pharmacist about the different types of systems available. Also, be sure a system is right for you and your loved one and that it is easy to use. Check with your doctor or pharmacist before using an envelope or container system to verify it is suitable for your own or your loved ones medicines.

**Cautions on using any container system:** If you or your loved one often have children visiting, be wary of using any container system, since it requires leaving medicines out in the open. Also, some drugs, such as nitroglycerin, lose their strength if exposed to the open air; others must be kept refrigerated. Before using any container system, check with your pharmacist or doctor to find out whether your own or your loved ones medicines will deteriorate if left out in the open for a few hours.

## **The Calendar (or Blister) Card**

The calendar card is a day-by-day dosage card for people who take several medicines at different times.

Each card contains 31 separate sections (called blisters) large enough to hold several pills or capsules. Each blister has the day of the month next to it (from 1 to 31), with corresponding stickers indicating the day.

A card is prepared by the pharmacist for each time of day a person takes medicine. If a person takes medicine four times during the day, four cards are prepared. All doses are sealed into the card. Cards are customized for each person and repackaged to accommodate changes in prescriptions.

Ask your pharmacist if your own or your loved one's medicine can be packaged and dispensed in a calendar card. You may have to pay a little more for the service, but if it helps you or your loved one take the medicines properly, it's worth it.

Your responsibility for your own and your loved one's health care doesn't end with getting instructions and developing a good system for taking medicines. To stay as healthy as possible, you should pay attention to how your own and your loved one's body responds to medicines and be sensitive to side effects.

Why? When you or your loved one take several drugs each day, there may be unusual combination effects. One drug may neutralize or strengthen the effect of another. Some of these interactions are well known and are actually used by doctors to your advantage. Other interactions can cause problems. Further, when a person ages, his or her body may absorb the drugs differently than when he or she was younger. Just as an elderly person usually needs less food than a younger person needs, he or she may need less medicine.

In most cases, if medicines act on your own or your loved ones body in negative ways, your doctor can prescribe substitute drugs or drug combinations that can do as good a job without the bad side effects. However, before the doctor can make such decisions, you must gather and report the information to him or her.

In some cases, a prescribed medicine will have an unavoidable side effect for most users. For example, some muscle relaxants make the patient feel drowsy. At this stage of medical science, there may be no alternative drug available. You need to be aware of such side effects and take them into account in your own or your loved ones plans each day.

Do not believe that adverse effects of medications are necessarily "natural" especially for older people. This may be so in a given case, but the judgement should be made by your doctor. To reduce the risk of adverse effects from medicines, we recommend the following:

- ?? **At every visit to the doctor, inform him or her of all the other medicines- including non-prescription drugs-you or your loved one are taking.** This information will help the doctor avoid prescribing a medicine that will interact negatively with others being taken. Further, if you or your loved one already are having bad reactions to medicines, this information will help your doctor diagnose the reasons for these reactions.
- ?? **When the medicine is prescribed, ask the doctor what you or your loved one should expect to feel** and what can be done if a common side effect does occur. If the effect occurs, you or your loved one will then know whether it is only to be expected or if the doctor should be contacted.
- ?? **Take medicines as directed.** Taking a drug incorrectly may cause some bad reactions. Perhaps you or your loved one are taking it too often or in too large a dose or not often enough or in too small a dose. If you or your loved one **must** return to the doctor for advice on how to reduce bad side effects, tell him or her how you or your loved one have been taking the drug
- ?? **Be aware, beforehand, of what to do if anything goes wrong in taking medicines.** Know who to contact and how to reach him or her. Keep the phone numbers of your own or your loved ones doctors on hand-next to the telephone on a card you carry in your wallet or purse and in the ElderCare Medical Planner.

## Your Prescriptions: Questions to Answer

Be sure you or your loved one know the answers to each of these questions when a medicine is prescribed. Talk to your doctor and pharmacist to get the facts.

- ?? What is the name of the medicine?
- ?? What is the medicine supposed to do?
- ?? How long is it likely to be before my loved one or I feel better?
- ?? What are the possible side effects from the medicine?
- ?? What should be done if side effects occur?
- ?? Are there any side effects that should be reported to the doctor?
- ?? How and when do I or my loved one take this medicine?
- ?? Are there any special instructions for taking this medicine?
- ?? How long should my loved one or I take this medicine?
- ?? Are there any foods, beverages, medicines or activities that should be avoided while taking this medicine?
- ?? Under what circumstances, should my loved one or I stop taking this medicine?
- ?? What should be done if a dose is missed?
- ?? How should the medicine be stored?

### Other questions you may want to ask are:

- ?? Is this medication really needed?
- ?? Is the medicine available in a generic form that costs less? Can the generic drug be substituted for the brand name medicine?
- ?? Can the prescription be refilled? If so, am I or my loved one to see the doctor before having it refilled?

### Hooked on a Prescription Drug?

Anyone can become addicted to prescription medicines. Drugs that are used to relieve pain, anxiety, depression, insomnia, coughs and suppress appetite are major culprits. If you or your loved one have been using a prescription drug for some time, take this self-test to determine whether you or the family member you are caring for might be dependent.

Y N Have family members or your doctor ever told you that they were worried about your use of medications?

Y N Do you get annoyed or uncomfortable when others talk about your use of pills?

Y N Have you been treated previously for alcohol abuse, prescription drug abuse or other drug abuse?

Y N After having been turned down for a refill, have you ever changed doctors or drug stores in order to get more of a medicine?

Y N Have you been taking diet pills, tranquilizers, pain medicine or sleeping pills for more than two months?

Y N Are you using your pills more as a crutch than as a solution to a temporary medical problem?

Y N Do you take your pills on the sly or hide that you are taking them?

Y N Do you feel you might be addicted to your prescription medicine?

If you answer yes to any of these questions, there's a possibility you are physically or psychologically addicted to your medicine. If you have concerns, talk to your doctor.

(The test was adapted from "Hooked on You," Hope Health Publications, 1990)

## Conclusion

The ultimate safety and effectiveness of all medicine rests with the user or their caregiver. Having good information about your own or your loved one's medicine and taking it as instructed is the best way to avoid problems and receive the greatest benefit.

It is not practical or necessary to do everything recommended here. You should select from among the suggestions those that can be useful in your individual circumstances. The suggestions are just helpful tools for the responsible user of medicines.

Medicine is not the solution to every problem. Talk with your doctor about alternative treatments or if your own or your loved ones health problems can be treated by changes in diet, exercise or stress level.

If you or your loved one have been taking a medicine for a long time, ask your doctor to evaluate how well it is working and whether it still needs to be taken.