

Avoiding Overmedication & Harmful Medication Reactions

To lower the chances of overmedication and medication reactions, the American Geriatrics Society's Foundation for Health in Aging (www.healthinaging.org) recommends the following 10 tips.

1. Ask before taking an OTC medication.

Medications you can buy at the store without having a prescription from the doctor are called over-the-counter (OTC) medications. Not all OTC medications are appropriate for older people because they can cause side effects. In addition, some OTC medications—like ibuprofen and naproxen—may have different names but belong to the same medication class or category. Taking both of these is like taking a double dose. OTC medications may also interact with your medications prescribed by your doctor causing you to have new health symptoms. For these reasons, you should always check with your doctor before taking OTC medications.

2. Make a list.

Make a list of all the medications you take, their doses, and how often you take them. Be sure to include any OTC medications, vitamins, supplements or herbal or other remedies. Review this list with your doctor to be sure the medications and doses are correct. Your doctor should keep this list in your records so others who care for you have access to this information. You should keep a copy of this list with you too.

3. Share it.

Each time you see a doctor, show him/her your medication list so he/she knows exactly what you're taking.

4. Ask questions.

Whenever a doctor prescribes a new medication or a change in the dose of a medication, ask why. (If, for example, your doctor prescribes a new medication to ease the side effects of a medication you're already taking, ask if you should continue taking the medication that is causing the side effects.)

Besides asking what the medication is for, also ask:

- When and how you should take any new medication.
- What you should do if you miss a medication.
- Whether the medication might interact with other medications, vitamins or supplements you're taking.
- What warning signs of a medication interaction you should watch for.

If you forget to ask your doctor something you need to know about your medications, call the office and ask the nurse. Do not wait until the next visit! Make a list of questions about your medications or your health symptoms, when you think of them at home, and take the list with you to your doctor. It is important that you understand as much as possible about your health problems and the medications you take for them, so be sure to ask any questions you may have.

5. Update your list.

Remember to add any new medication or dose to your medication list. Whenever a specialist has prescribed a new medication for you, be sure to let your primary doctor know.

6. Read labels.

Check the label to make sure the pharmacist has given you the right amount of the right medication at the right dose. Your pharmacist can put large-print labels on your medications if you have difficulty seeing the label.

7. Follow directions.

Take your medications exactly as directed by your doctor. If you have questions about how or when to take your medications, call your doctor or pharmacist.

8. Try to use one pharmacy for all prescriptions.

By using only one pharmacy, your pharmacist will have a complete list of all the medications you are taking. The pharmacist can then alert you to possible harmful medication interactions. This is especially important if you are taking five or more medications. Ask your pharmacist to run any new medication through a medication interactions computer database to check for interactions with other medications you are taking.

9. Review and revise.

Once or twice a year, ask your primary care doctor to review your list of medications, supplements, and vitamins with you, and check whether you still need each at its current dose.

10. Report problems.

If you begin to have new health problems after starting a new medication, you may be having a reaction to the medication. If so, tell your doctor right away. If you have a serious reaction—if you have difficulty breathing or your throat begins to swell—call 911 and go to the emergency room immediately!

(This information is based on the recommendations found in "Avoiding Overmedication and Harmful Drug Reactions" on the American Geriatrics Society's Foundation for Health in Aging website.)

