

How to Avoid Medication Errors

Be an Informed Consumer

We all know that medication errors do happen. They happen in hospitals, in pharmacies, or even at home. The more information you have, the better able you are to prevent errors and to take care of yourself. Be sure to ask your pharmacists, doctors, and nurses about your medications. And if you have a chronic illness, find out all you can about your illness and the medications you are taking. What you learn may help protect you later. Your doctors, nurses, and pharmacists work hard to keep you healthy, but you are also responsible. Learn what questions to ask. Expect answers—it's your life and your health!

Avoiding Errors at Home

- Make a list of the medications you are now taking. Include the dose, the date prescribed, how often you take them, the imprint on each tablet or capsule, and the name of the pharmacy. Any time your medications change, change your list, too.
- Also list your medication and food allergies, and any over-the-counter medications, vitamins, nutritional supplements, or herbal products you take regularly.
- Keep medications in their original containers. Many pills look alike, so by keeping them in their original containers, you will know which is which and how to take them.
- Read the label every time you take a dose to make sure you have the right drug and you are following the instructions.
- Turn on the lights to take your medication. If you can't see what you're taking, you may take the wrong thing.
- Do not store medications in the bathroom medicine cabinet or in direct sunlight. Humidity, heat and light can affect medications' potency and safety.
- Keep medications for people separate from pets' medications. Mix-ups can be dangerous.
- Do not keep tubes of ointments or creams next to your tube of toothpaste. They feel a lot alike when you grab quickly, but a mistake could be serious.
- Flush old medications down the toilet. Some drugs become toxic after the expiration date.
- Do not chew, crush, or break any capsules or tablets unless instructed. Some long-acting medications are absorbed too quickly when chewed and other medications won't be effective or could make you sick.
- To give liquid medication, use only the cup or measuring device that came with it. Dosing errors can happen if you use a different cup because the cups are often different sizes or have different markings. Also, household teaspoons and tablespoons are not very accurate, which is important with some medications. Your pharmacist may give you a special spoon or syringe instead.



Avoiding errors in the hospital

- Take your medications and the list of your medications with you when you go to the hospital. Your doctors and nurses will need to know what you are taking.
- Bring a list of medications that you cannot take (because of allergic reactions, etc.). Give the reasons why, and show it to the health professional(s) managing your care.
- Make a list of medications you are now taking. Include the dose, how often you take them, the imprint on each tablet or capsule, and the name of the pharmacy. The imprint can help you identify a drug when you get refills.
- After your doctor has seen them, send your medications home with your family. While you are in the hospital you may not need the same medications.
- Tell your doctor you want to know the names of any new medications and the reasons you are taking them. That way, if anyone tells you anything different, you'll know to ask questions, which might prevent errors.
- Look at all medicines before you take them. If it doesn't look like what you usually take, ask why. It might be a generic drug, or it might be the wrong drug.
- Request any written information that is available about your medications.
- Do not let anyone give you medication until they have checked your hospital ID bracelet. This helps prevent you from getting someone else's medication.
- Before any test or procedure, ask if it will require any dyes or medicines. Remind your nurse and doctor if you have allergies.
- When you're ready to go home, have the doctor, nurse, or pharmacist go over each medication with you and a family member.
- If you're too ill to follow these instructions, ask a friend or relative to help.

We Can Help

Modern medications are increasingly complex and powerful. They have great healing power when used properly. Yet their ability to heal or harm depends largely on the quality of the medical and pharmaceutical care that guides their use. That's why every patient should work closely with their physicians, nurses and pharmacist to help make the best use of medications. By being an informed patient, you can decrease the chance of medication errors and bad reactions.

If You Have Questions or Concerns

If you have any questions or concerns, please call your hospital and ask to speak with a Patient Relations representative.

Much of the material in this fact sheet came from the Institute for Safe Medication Use in Warminster, PA., and the American Society for Health System Pharmacists.