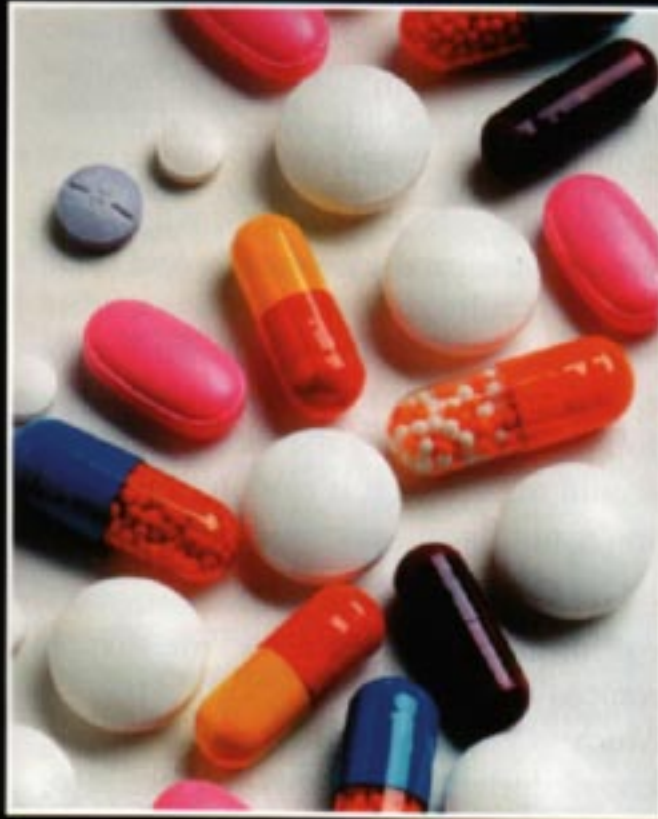


# **Your Role in Safe Medication Use**



**A Guide for Patients and Families**

Medications can cure diseases and alleviate symptoms. They can relieve pain. They make it possible for people with long-term illness to lead healthier lives.

Medications are also powerful chemicals. It is essential that they be properly used. This means that every patient must receive the right medication, in the right amount, and at the right time.

Your doctor, nurse, and pharmacist have major roles in safe medication use. It's their responsibility to select the medication that's best for you. They should prescribe the correct dosage, dispense the product correctly, and label it clearly. It's also their job to tell you what you need to know about your medications and to answer your questions. Once you've started taking the medication, they should make sure it is working and that you're not having any serious side effects.

As a patient or family member, you are part of the health care team. You share the responsibility for safe medication use. Much as you trust your care provider's knowledge and judgment, you owe it to yourself and your family to learn as much as you can about medication use.

Here are some things you can do to ensure safe medication use for you and your family.

### At the Clinic, Doctor's Office, and Pharmacy

- Learn as much as you can about the disease or condition for which the medication was prescribed. Are there alternatives to the recommended therapy? What are they?
- Find out everything you can about the medication. Listen to what your doctor or pharmacist says. Take notes. Ask as many questions as you think are necessary. If you don't understand the answer, ask again!
- Before you leave, ask the doctor, nurse or pharmacist if you can repeat the instructions that you've been given. This is a good way to clear up misunderstandings that might cause problems later.
- Make sure that each of your doctors is aware of medications that other physicians have prescribed for you. Tell them about any over-the-counter medications and homeopathic and herbal products you are taking. If you have any allergies, tell your doctor about them.
- Pharmacists are excellent sources of medication information. Try to take your new prescriptions and refill requests to the same pharmacy, so that you get to know your pharmacist, and he or she gets to know you.
- When you pick up a newly prescribed prescription, request to speak to a pharmacist and be sure to read all written handout materials thoroughly. If you are taking more than one prescription or, if you are obtaining medication at a site other than at the dispensing pharmacy, be sure to disclose this to the pharmacist. This is very important for the pharmacist to know.
- Make sure that the pharmacist knows about any allergies you have and any alternative/herbal therapies you may be taking.

- If you're greeted at the counter by a pharmacy technician or cashier, ask to see the pharmacist if you have questions. Some pharmacies have areas where you may speak privately with your pharmacist. If it's an especially busy time, you might want to call the pharmacist after you return home.
- Before you leave the pharmacy, open the bag and double-check the medication to make sure you've received the correct product.
- Remember that nurses can also share information about medications with you.

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#### At Home

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- Before taking the first dose:
  - Read the label. Make sure that the medication you have received is the one that your doctor ordered. If there is any difference in the appearance or shape of your medication between refills do not take it until you've discussed it with a pharmacist. Remember, many medications have names which sound or look alike.
  - Read the directions on the label and any written information you've been given. If any of it seems to contradict what you already know about the medication, call your doctor, nurse, or pharmacist.
- Recheck the label before each dose. Never take medications in the dark.
- If you develop itching or swelling or if you have trouble breathing after taking a new medication, get medical help immediately.
- Be alert for other side effects. If they become troublesome, call your pharmacist, nurse, or doctor.
- Take the medication exactly as prescribed. In some cases, you can stop taking a medica-

tion when your symptoms improve. In other cases, you must complete the course of therapy, even though you're feeling much better.

- Keep medications in their original container and store them out of the reach of children.
- Check the expiration date on all medications. Throw away outdated products.
- You may find it useful to keep a medication log. This record will be helpful for both you and your care provider. Bring it with you to your appointments.
- Invest in a reference book on medications. Several are available in low-cost paperback editions. Ask your health care provider for a recommendation.

### Things you should know about your medications

1. What are brand and generic names of the product?
2. What is the purpose of the medication?
3. What does the medication look like?
4. What is the dosage?
5. How should I take this medication?
6. How often should I take this medication? What should I do if I miss a dose?
7. Does this medication have any side effects? What are they? What should I do if they occur?
8. Does this medication interact with any other medications? With foods? What are these interactions, and what should I do if they occur?
9. How should I store this medication?

### In the Hospital

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If you are hospitalized, you may not be feeling strong enough to take an active role in medica-

tion use. Often it's family members who provide the comfort and support needed to promote your return to good health. In either case, you rely on the hospital staff to ensure that medications are administered correctly and on time.

Hospitals are deeply aware of this responsibility to patients and families. They have systems of checks and balances in place to make sure that medications are used safely and effectively. Each medication order is checked and double-checked by pharmacy and nursing staff, and medication records are often maintained on computer systems.

Even during this critical time, however, you can do things to help ensure safe medication use. If you are too ill or tired, your family member or caregiver may be able to help. For example:

- When you are admitted to the hospital, bring a list of the medications you are taking. If there isn't time to make a list, bring the medications. Keep them in their containers.
- Each time a new medication is prescribed, make sure that the doctor, nurse, or pharmacist answers the questions listed above. Ask to see what the medication looks like (for example, the shape and color of tablets and capsules, or the color of liquids and intravenous medications) and how often it is administered.
- If a nurse comes to replace an I.V. solution or administer a medication, ask what it is for. If a dose is not administered on time, ring the nursing station. If the nurse gives you a green tablet and you think it should be orange, question it.

In some cases, the answers are simple. For example, if you've been taking a brand-name product at home and the hospital uses a generic product, the color or shape of the tablet

may be different. In other cases, asking questions can prevent a medication error.

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### Handling a Hospital or Retail Pharmacy Medication Error

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Serious medication errors are very rare. But what if an error does occur or you suspect an error? If you are concerned that an error has occurred, ask your doctor. Here are some things patients and families can do.

- Remember that the effects of most medication errors are minimal. Ask what the probable impact of the error will be.
- Ask for a full explanation of why the error occurred. Expect an honest dialogue.
- If you feel that your questions are not being answered satisfactorily, ask to talk with the hospital's designated patient advocate (for example, a nurse manager or patient representative).
- If you have suggestions about how to prevent medication errors, share them with your care provider or a patient representative.
- Encourage your hospital to include patients and family members on its quality improvement committees.

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### Teamwork Pays Off

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Taking an active role in safe medication use has many advantages. Not only will it help prevent medication errors, it will also make you a more informed health care consumer. Your doctor, nurse, and pharmacist welcome your involvement. Teamwork has advantages for everyone.

This pamphlet is provided by The Massachusetts Coalition for the Prevention of Medical Errors

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