

Safe Medication Practices

Usually if we get sick, the medicine we take helps us stay healthy when we follow the dosage instructions. But sometimes medication errors do happen and people can get hurt as a result. Medication errors can happen in hospitals, in pharmacies or even at home.

The good news is that the more information you have, the better able you are to prevent errors and take care of yourself.

Taking Your Medication

When taking medicine, keep in mind these safety tips:

- Don't chew, crush or break any capsules or tablets unless the medicine label instructions or your healthcare practitioner tells you. Some long-acting medications are absorbed too quickly when chewed. Other medications won't work if you crush them and could even make you sick.
- To take a liquid medication, use only the cup or other measuring tool that came with the medicine. Household teaspoons and tablespoons do not always give the correct dosage. Your pharmacist may give you a special oral syringe instead.
- Never take someone else's medication.
- Read the label every time you take a dose to make sure you have the right drug and that you are following the instructions.
- Turn on a light to make sure you can see what you're doing when you take your medications.

Safe Storage & Disposal

How you store and dispose medicine also can eliminate errors and protect others. Try the following tips:

- Keep medications in the containers they came in. It will help you remember which drugs are which and how to take them.
- Store medications where children can't see or reach them, like a locked box or cabinet.
- Keep medications for people separate from pets' medications or household chemicals.
- Don't keep tubes of ointments or creams next to your tube of toothpaste. They feel a lot alike when you grab them quickly, but using one instead of the other could be a serious mistake.
- Flush any old medications, including used patches, down the toilet. Children and pets might get into medications that are thrown into the wastebasket. Some drugs actually become poisonous after the expiration date.
- Don't keep medications in the bathroom medicine cabinet or in direct sunlight.

Make Lists

At home, keep track of your medications, allergies and pharmacy information by doing the following:

- Make a list of the medications you are taking now. Write down:
 - dosage,
 - how often you take them,
 - the letters or numbers printed on each capsule, and
 - name and phone number of the pharmacy where you bought them.
- List your medication and food allergies, and any over-the-counter medications, vitamins, nutritional supplements or herbal products that you take on a daily or weekly basis.

In the Doctor's Office

When you visit the healthcare practitioner either in his office or in the hospital, the following tips can help ensure your safety:

- Take your medications and the list of your medications with you when you go to the hospital or healthcare practitioner's office.
- Tell your healthcare practitioner you want to know the names of each medication and the reasons you are taking them.
- Look at all medicines before you take them. If the medicine doesn't look like what you usually take, ask why. It might be a generic drug, or it might be the wrong drug.
- Do not let anyone give you medications without checking your hospital ID bracelet every time.
- When you're ready to go home, have the healthcare practitioner, nurse or pharmacist go over each medication with you and a family member, and update your list.
- Ask your healthcare practitioner to explain what is written on any prescription, including the drug name and how often you should take it.
- Tell your healthcare practitioner you want the purpose of each medication written on the prescription.

Talking to the Pharmacist

Your pharmacist can be your partner in preventing medication errors. Ask your pharmacist these questions:

- What are the brand and generic names of the medication?
- What does it look like?
- Why am I taking it?
- How much should I take, and how often?
- When is the best time to take it?
- How long will I need to take it?
- What side effects should I expect, and what should I do if they happen?
- What should I do if I miss a dose?
- Should I not take this drug with other medications or foods?
- Does this replace anything else I was taking?
- Where and how do I store it?

Over-the-Counter Medications

Additionally, when buying over-the-counter medications, read the labels carefully because they might have ingredients you do not want or should not take. They may be harmful if taken with your other medications, cause an allergic reaction or not be correct for your symptoms. Ask your pharmacist for help if you have trouble choosing the right drug. ■

Resource

Institute for Safe Medication Practices. (2004). How to take your medications safely. Retrieved Sept. 13, 2004 from the World Wide Web: <http://www.ismp.org/consumer/brochure.html>.

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