

# Medication Safety Guide



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## How to Protect Yourself Against Potential Medication Errors

More than 7000 medication error-related deaths occur each year in the United States.<sup>1</sup> To help minimize your chances of having medication error-related problems, the following guide was developed. In it, you will find information on nine simple steps you can take today, including:

- Know your medications
- Share your list with your healthcare professionals
- Keep the list with you
- Update your list regularly
- Learn from your provider *before* you leave the office
- Ask your pharmacist
- *Before* you leave the pharmacy, double check the medication you received
- Store your medications properly

Please follow these steps to help obtain the benefits of your medications while helping to protect yourself from potential medication errors.

## 1. Know your medications.

Before you put something into your body, you should know what it is and why you need it.

Start by reviewing the medications you are already taking. Write a list of all your prescription and nonprescription medications, and don't forget to include any vitamins, nutritional supplements, and herbal products that you may also be taking. For **each** medication, try to provide the following:<sup>2,3</sup>

- **What**           What is the name of the medication?  
List brand and generic names whenever possible.
- **Why**            Why are you taking it? For example: diabetes, cholesterol.
- **How much**    What dose are you taking? Try to include the number of tablets and strength (such as milligrams [mg] or units).
- **How**            How do you take it? Before meals or after meals? When and how many times a day? How far apart? Swallowed whole, chewed or injected?
- **Looks like**   Describe what the medication looks like.
- **Allergies**     List any allergies you may have to medications, foods or dyes.
- **Pharmacy**    List all of the pharmacy names and telephone numbers where you fill your medications.

Below is an example of a medication list.

<b>MEDICATION LIST</b>				
<b>Name:</b>	<i>John Smith</i>			
<b>Updated:</b>	<i>January 2009</i>			
<b>Pharmacies:</b>	<i>Apple Pharmacy (1-555-222-3333)</i>			
<b>Allergies:</b>	<i>None</i>			
What? <small>(Medication Name)</small>	Why?	How Much? <small>(Dose)</small>	How Do I Take It? <small>(Directions)</small>	Looks Like? <small>(Size/Color/Shape)</small>
<i>St. Joseph's (aspirin)</i>	<i>Protects My Heart</i>	<i>81 mg</i>	<i>Swallow 1 tablet every morning after breakfast.</i>	<i>Pink, round tablets</i>

## 2. Share your list with your health care professionals.

**Health care provider** — Show your provider your current medication list at each appointment. This is to make sure that you are on the right medication at the right dose. If you see multiple providers, it is especially important to show **each** of them what you are on since they might not know about the medications other providers prescribed for you. Don't be concerned about telling one provider what another provider has prescribed; they all want to help you improve your health.

**Pharmacists** — Sharing your current medication list with your pharmacist will help ensure that your medications are not interacting with each other, and that you are not taking too much or too little of a medication. If you go to more than one pharmacy, or if you pay for medications without going through your insurance, it is especially important to let your pharmacist know about these medications. This way, they will have a complete list and can do a thorough medication review for you.

## 3. Keep the list with you.

You will be glad that you have your current medication list with you should a medical emergency occur. This will help your health care team make sure that you receive the care you need.

## 4. Update your list regularly.

Try to update your list any time there is a change to your medications or allergies. The more regularly you update it, the less time it will take to maintain it, and the more accurate your list will be.

## 5. Learn from your provider *before* you leave the office.

When your provider gives you a new prescription, ask him or her for the following information:<sup>2,3</sup>

- **Name** of the medication.
- **How often** you should be taking the medication.
- **How long** you should be on the medication.
- **Purpose of the medication.** Ask your provider to write the purpose directly on the prescription, since many medication names look similar when they are handwritten. This will help the pharmacist, who fills your medication, to take an extra step to make sure that you are getting the right medication.
- **When** you can expect to start seeing the benefits of the medication.
- **What side effects** you can expect from the medication, and what to do if you should experience them.
- **What could happen** if you forget to take it the way you are supposed to.

If you have any additional questions or concerns about your new medication, this is a good time to ask your provider.

## 6. Ask your pharmacist.

Your pharmacist is there to answer any questions you may have about your medications. Be sure to get answers for the following important questions:<sup>2,3</sup>

- What are the brand and generic names of this medication?
- What is the strength (such as milligrams or units) of this medication?
- Why am I on this medication?
- How long should I be on this medication?
- How am I supposed to take this medication? Can I break it in half?
- What should I do if I miss a dose?
- What are the possible side effects of this medication? What should I do if they occur?
- What medications or foods should I avoid while taking this medication?
- Is this medication meant to replace any other medication(s) I am already taking?
- How should I store this medication?
- How should I throw away any unused medication? (if applicable)
- When should I order my next refill? (if applicable)

## **7. Before you leave the pharmacy, double check the medication you received.**

Every time you have a prescription filled at the pharmacy, double check the following before you leave the pharmacy:

- Your name is on the medication label
- The medication name and directions match what your provider had told you
- If the medication is a refill, look at the size, shape, color and markings on the tablets or capsules to see if they match your last prescription. If any of the above are different, ask your pharmacist about it.

## **8. Store your medications properly.<sup>2,3</sup>**

- Keep your medications where children cannot see or reach them
- Do not store your medications in your bathroom medicine cabinet or in direct sunlight, as humidity, heat and light can affect how well your medications work
- Do not keep your medication tubes next to your toothpaste tube. This is to prevent you from grabbing the wrong tube for the wrong purpose.
- Keep your medications in a separate place from pet products and household chemicals. Mix-ups are common and can be dangerous to your health and that of your pet(s).

## 9. Dispose of your medications responsibly.

The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) created general guidelines to help you dispose of your medications properly. The following is an excerpt from the FDA Consumer Health Information Page on *How to Dispose of Unused Medicines*.<sup>4</sup>

- Follow any specific disposal instructions on the medication label or patient information that accompanies the medication. Do not flush prescription medications down the toilet unless this information specifically instructs you to do so.
- If no instructions are given, throw the medications in the household trash, **but first**:
  - Take them out of their original containers and mix them with an undesirable substance, such as used coffee grounds or kitty litter. The medication will be less appealing to children and pets and unrecognizable to people who may intentionally go through your trash.
  - Put them in a sealable bag, empty can or other container to prevent the medication from leaking or breaking out of a garbage bag.
- Take advantage of community drug take-back programs that allow the public to bring unused medications to a central location for proper disposal. Call your city or county government's household trash and recycling service to see if a program is available in your community.
- Some additional tips:
  - Before throwing out a medication container, scratch out all identifying information on the prescription label to make it unreadable. This will help protect your identity and the privacy of your personal health information.
  - Do not give medications to friends. Providers prescribe medications based on a person's specific symptoms and medical history. A medication that works for you could be dangerous for someone else.
  - When in doubt about proper disposal, speak to your pharmacist.

## References:

1. Strategies to reduce medication errors: working to improve medication safety. US Food and Drug Administration website. <http://www.fda.gov/Drugs/ResourcesForYou/Consumers/ucm143553.htm>. Updated July 11, 2009. Accessed October 12, 2009.
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