

# YOUR HEALTH IS IMPORTANT: A UNIVERSITY OF TENNESSEE EXTENSION BEMEDWISE PUBLICATION

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## The Importance of Understanding Your Medications

Medications are an important tool for treating short-term problems, like a headache, and chronic conditions such as high blood pressure or diabetes. But did you know that not taking your medicines as prescribed can be dangerous to your health and costly to your wallet? About half of the prescriptions written in the United States each year are not taken as prescribed<sup>1,2,3</sup> Taking your medicines correctly can help protect your health and save money.

## Why Should You Talk to Your Pharmacist?

Drug company advertisements encourage you to “talk to your doctor” about their medicine, but you can also talk to your pharmacist.

Pharmacists are your partners in taking care of your health. Pharmacists understand the chemical and physical properties of medicines, their uses, and how the medicines work in the body. Pharmacists must pass licensing exams to practice in the state of Tennessee and complete yearly requirements for continuing education to make sure they are up to date on medication knowledge.

The more medicines you take, the more important it is to talk to your pharmacist. Why?

Because taking multiple medicines every day can increase your risk of developing side effects or experiencing medicine interactions.

## How Can Your Pharmacist Help You?

Your pharmacist can answer questions about your medicines, recommend over the counter medicines (OTC) and discuss side effects of medicines or combination of medicines. Some dietary supplements and herbal medicines can change how your body responds to medications and may cause a drug interaction or medication error. Ask your pharmacist about your medicines and the dietary or herbal supplements you are taking.

## What Should You Tell Your Pharmacist?

To get the most health benefits from your prescription medicines, you need to tell your pharmacist the following information:

- The names of all prescriptions and over the counter medicines (including herbals and dietary supplements) you are taking and the reason you are taking each one.
- Any allergies or medicine sensitivities.
- Any past side effects you have experienced due to taking medicines.
- Your pregnancy status (if you are or could be pregnant).
- Any fears or concerns you have about taking the medicine(s).

Can't remember what medicines you are taking? It's helpful to have a written record of all the medicines you are taking. Call your county's Extension office for UT Medication Reminder tools.

## What Should Your Pharmacist Tell You?

When you pick up a new prescription your pharmacist will give you the following information:

- Name of the medicine
- Purpose of the medicine
- When and for how long to take the medicine
- Foods, beverages, or other medicines you should avoid while taking this medicine
- Side effects that may occur and what you should do if you experience these side effects

## Problems with Medications?

What if you have a question or problem with your medicines when your pharmacy is not open? Call the Tennessee Poison Center at 1-800-222-1222 when you cannot reach your doctor or pharmacist. Poison specialists can help you with questions and concerns regarding your medications. The Tennessee Poison Center can help if you have made a mistake with taking your medicines, cannot identify a medicine, or are experiencing side effects from your medicines. The poison help hotline is open 24 hours a day, seven days a week. All calls are free of charge. To learn more about your poison center, refer to its website at [vumc.org/poison-control](http://vumc.org/poison-control).

Always check with your pharmacist before taking any over the counter (OTC) medicines. Some of these OTC products are as powerful as prescription medicines and they can interact with your prescription, dietary/herbal supplements, and other OTC medicines. Please remember that just because a medication is OTC, it doesn't mean that it is safe. Speak with your doctor or pharmacist first before deciding to take an OTC.

## How to Avoid Medication Mistakes

We all take medicines at one time or another. Many of us take medicines daily for a chronic or constant ailment or disease. Americans take an average of four prescriptions to treat chronic diseases<sup>4</sup>. In addition, most Americans also take over the counter (OTC) medicines and dietary or herbal supplements. However, nearly half of Americans risk making medicine errors or mistakes because they do not take their medicines as directed. A medication error or mistake is any avoidable event that may cause or lead to incorrect medicine use or patient harm. Preventable medication errors can cause you unnecessary discomfort and waste your money. These errors can be serious and life-threatening.

### At Home

- Keep an updated list of all the prescription medicines, over the counter (OTC) medicines and dietary and herbal supplements, such as multi-vitamins, vitamins and minerals, and herbal products. Use the UT Medication Reminder tools to keep a record of your medicines.
- Carry an updated medication list with you and have it reviewed every time you visit your doctor or pharmacist.
- Write down any questions you have about your medicines so you can remember to ask your doctor or pharmacist.
- Never take someone else's medicine. You do not know if it will work well with your other medicines, if the dose is too high for you, or if you are allergic to it.
- Measure and take medications using the cup or measuring device that comes with the medicine. Dosing mistakes can happen if you measure a medication using a different cup or household spoons, which are not always accurate.
- Turn on lights, and if needed, put on your glasses to take your medicine(s). If you cannot see what you are taking, you may take the wrong medicine. Call the Tennessee Poison Center if you suspect you have taken the wrong medicine.

## At Your Doctor's Office or Clinic

- Take your medicine list with you every time you go to a doctor's office. Make sure your medicine list is updated and includes all prescription and over the counter (OTC) medicines and dietary/herbal supplements you are currently taking.
- Ask your doctor to explain each prescription, including the medicine name and how often you should take it. Double check the information on the label when you pick up a prescription from the pharmacy. Be sure to speak with your pharmacist if something does not make sense.
- Tell your doctor you want the purpose of the medication on the prescription label. Many medicine names look alike; knowing a medicine's purpose helps you and your pharmacist double-check the prescription.
- If your doctor gives you samples, ask the doctor and/or your pharmacist to make sure the samples will not interact with your other medicine(s). Pharmacists are available to check for drug interactions and allergies.

## At Your Pharmacy

- Make sure your pharmacist has an up-to-date list of all the medicines you are taking.
- Know that you have the right to talk to your pharmacist if you have any questions. Ask the pharmacist to explain how to properly take the medicine, the side effects of the medicine, and what to do if you experience side effects.
- Be sure to have your pharmacist check your prescription to see if the medicine looks different than what you normally take. Sometimes the tablets and capsules will be different in size or color because they are made by a different manufacturer. Checking to make sure the medicine is the same as you have taken in the past is a good way to prevent a medication error.

## At the Hospital

- Bring your medicine list, or your medicines in their original containers, with you to the hospital.
- Ask the health care provider at the hospital to review the medicines you are taking.
- Do not take a medicine without being told its purpose.
- Tell someone if you think you are getting the wrong medicine.
- Ask for a list of the medicines that you should be taking at home before you are released from the hospital.

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