

Medicines and Older Adults



Department of Health and Human Services
Food and Drug Administration
5600 Fishers Lane (HFI-40)
Rockville, MD 20857

February 2000
(FDA) 00-3237

FDA U.S. Food and Drug Administration

The Food and Drug Administration, or FDA, is a United States government agency that makes sure medicines are safe and accurately labeled.

Be More Careful With Medicines

While everyone needs to be careful about taking medicines, older adults need to be even more careful. This is because:

- Older people often take more medicines than younger people
- Older people may react differently to medicine.

This brochure will tell you what older adults need to know about the medicines they take.



Problems

Two of the biggest problems older people have with medicines are:

- Reactions from mixing two or more drugs in the body, called “drug interactions.” A drug interaction can cause bad effects (usually called side effects), such as a rash, stomach upset or sleepiness.
- Getting too much of one medicine, called “drug overdose.” This, too, can cause side effects.

Older people are more likely to have side effects from drug interactions or drug overdoses because:

- They are more likely to take a number of different drugs.
- Their bodies use food and drugs slowly. This means that it may take longer for a drug to start working. Drugs also may stay in their bodies longer. This can cause too much of the medicine to be in the body.

Common side effects of drugs are:

- upset stomach, such as diarrhea or constipation

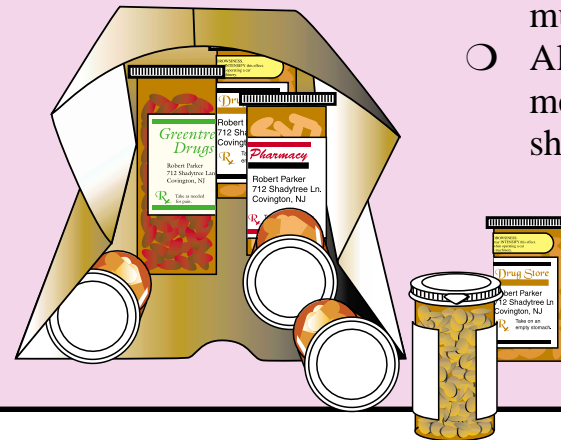


- blurred vision
- dizziness
- mood changes
- skin rash

“Start low and go slow” is good advice for older people when taking medicines. This means starting at the lowest dosage, and if this isn’t effective, increasing the dosage slowly.

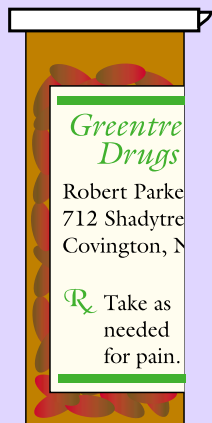
How to Prevent Drug Side Effects

- Take a drug only if you really need it. Ask your doctor if there is another way to treat a problem before taking prescription or over-the-counter drugs.
- Tell your doctor about all the drugs, vitamins, herbs and other pills you take. Make sure to include both prescription drugs (ones you get from the pharmacist with a doctor's prescription) and over-the-counter drugs (ones you can buy yourself without a prescription). If you have several doctors, make sure they all know what the others are prescribing.
- Ask one doctor, such as an internist or family medicine doctor, to track all your medicines. Put all your medicines in a bag. Take them to your next doctor's appointment. This is the best way to let your doctor know what medicines, vitamins and other pills you are taking.
- If you need drugs to treat more than one condition, ask your doctor if there is one drug that can treat both. For example, some blood pressure medicines also treat migraine headaches.
- If you have side effects, write them down. Write down when they happened. Also write down any new problems you have, even if you think they are not related to the drug. Tell your doctor about these side effects. Ask the doctor if there is another drug that may be better for you to take.
- Learn about the drugs you are taking. Ask the pharmacist and doctor questions. Read the information that comes with the medicine. Or, ask a family member or friend to read it for you.
- Follow directions. Read the label. Understand when you should take the medicine and how much you should take.
- Always take your medicine when you should.



Easy Ways to Take Medicine

You may have problems that make it hard for you to take medicine. Many older adults can't see well, can't use their hands well, or forget things easily. Here are some ways to make it easy for you to take medicine:

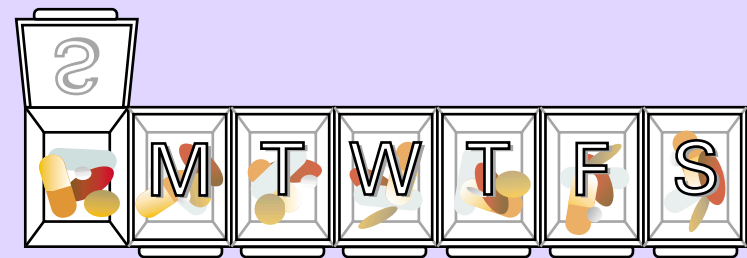


- Ask the pharmacist to put your medicines in big bottles that are easy to open.
- Ask for bottles with labels printed in large letters or use a magnifying glass, and read the label under bright light.
- Find ways to remind you to take your medicine. One way is to take medicines at the same time every day. For example, at meals or before you go to bed. Use charts and calendars.

Or put all the drugs you need to take for one day—or one week—in a small container, like a pillbox. You can buy pillboxes at drug stores. If you forget easily, you also might want to ask a family

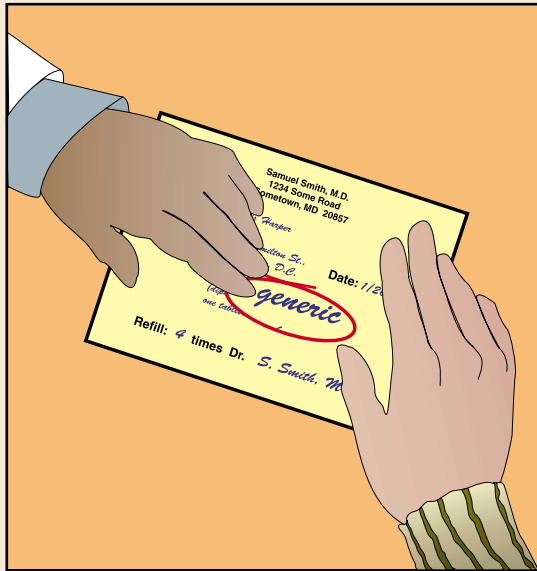
member or a nurse or other health worker to remind you when and how much medicine you need to take.

- Ask your doctor to set easy dosing times for you.



Questions to Ask Your Doctor or Pharmacist

- What is the name of the drug? Is this the brand name or a copy of the brand-name drug? Copies of brand-name drugs are called “generic drugs.” They usually cost less than brand-name drugs, but they work the same.
- If the prescription is written for a brand name, is it OK for the pharmacist to give me the generic version of this drug?
- What does the drug do?

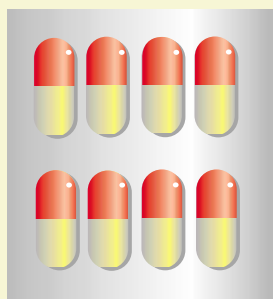


- When should I take the drug? How often?
- Does it matter if I take it with food?
- Are there any foods I should stop eating while I'm on this drug?
- Is it safe to drink alcohol, such as beer or wine, while I'm on this drug?
- How long will I need to take this drug?
- What should I do if I forget to take the medicine?
- What are common side effects?
- How will I know if this drug is working?
- Where should I keep this drug?



How to Save Money on Medicines

- When trying a drug for the first time, ask your doctor for free samples. Or ask the pharmacist for just a few pills before getting the whole prescription filled. That way, you can see if you have problems with the medicine before paying for a whole bottle.
- For drugs you take all the time, buy larger amounts at a time so that the price for each pill is cheaper. But before you do this make sure you will be able to use all the medicine within at least a year. Holding on to medicines for a long time may cause the drug to lose its ability to work.

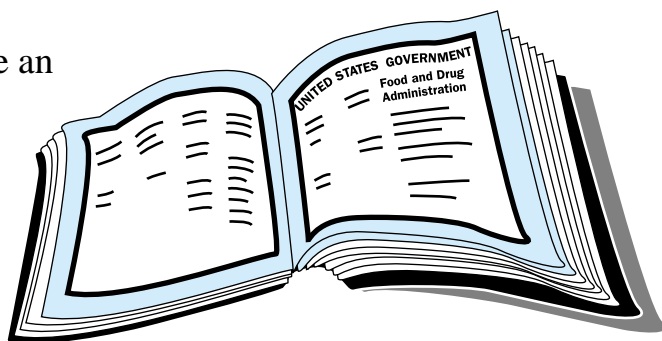


- Call around to see which store has the lowest price.
- If you are an older person ask about a senior citizen's discount.
- Ask your doctor if it's OK to take a generic drug instead of the brand-name drug. If it is OK, tell the pharmacist you want the generic version of the medicine.
- For drugs bought over the counter, buy the store-brand or discount brand. The pharmacist can help you choose.
- Call or write to the local chapter of the American Association for Retired Persons (AARP) or a local chapter of a health organization, such as the American Diabetes Association or the American Heart Association. You may be able to buy drugs through them at lower prices.



Do You Have Other Questions About Medicines?

FDA may have an office near you. Look for the number in the blue pages of the phone book.



Or, call FDA's toll-free number, 1-888-INFO-FDA (1-888-463-6332).
Or, on the World Wide Web at www.fda.gov.