



# Senior Series

A partnership between Ohio State University Extension  
and Ohio Aging Network professionals



For more information, visit the Ohio Department of Aging web site at: <http://www.goldenbuckeye.com>  
and Ohio State University Extension's "Aging in Ohio" web site at: <http://seniorseries.osu.edu>

## Guidelines for Using Medications Safely

Today's medications are more effective than ever before; however, any medication, if not used in the right way, can cause serious problems. Although our government works to ensure medications we take are safe, and our doctors and pharmacists help us to take what is appropriate, how we take our medicines is ultimately our responsibility. Consider the following guidelines when using medicines:

### Be Informed

- Know the name of the medication.
- Know what you are taking the medication for.
- Know how you should take the medicine.
- Know what to expect from the medicine.
- Know when you should stop taking the medication.

- Know when to call your doctor if you suspect there are problems.

### Take Medications Only as Directed

- Remember, your medications may not work properly if you do not take them as the label says.
- Be sure to take any medicine only as it is prescribed. Do not change the dose or stop taking a medication without talking to your doctor.

### Continue to Take a Medicine Until the Doctor Tells You to Stop

- Even if symptoms have gone away and you are feeling better, continue taking any medicine until your doctor tells you to stop or until you finish the prescription. If you stop taking medicine too soon the problem may return or worsen.

- If you feel a medication is not having the effect the doctor intended or seems to be doing more harm than good, call your doctor immediately.

## Be Honest With Health Care Professionals

In order for doctors or other health care professionals to provide help, it is important to give them complete and accurate information.

When you go to visit the doctor about your health, be sure to mention:

- **Any symptoms you have.** Tell about all your symptoms and answer all questions as accurately as you can. This will help the doctor find the best treatment for you.
- **All medications you are taking.** Without knowing what other medications you are taking, a doctor may prescribe a medicine that is the same or similar to one you already take or that may cause a medication interaction. Remember, herbs, vitamins, over-the-counter medications, and things obtained from health food stores are also medications. Tell your doctor how much and how often you take such items.
- **Any problems you think you may have taking the medicine.** If you think you will not be able to take a medication for whatever reason, say so and be specific.
- **If you miss doses.** If you did not take a previous medication or missed a few doses, tell your doctor.

If the doctor does not know, he or she may believe a treatment is not working and provide another, less effective medicine, or increase your dose and you may get too much of a medicine. By being open and honest, you can avoid any misunderstandings or unnecessary changes in treatment.

- **Side effects or unusual reactions.** Share information about any allergies, side effects, or unusual reactions you have had to previous medications. The better the information you share, the more it can help your doctor to prescribe a medication that will work best for you.

## Take Medications in Their Original Form

- *Never* crush pills or open capsules to make them easier to swallow, unless this is approved by a health care professional. Changing the form of any medication may alter how well it works in your body or may result in stomach upset. In addition, some medicines like time-release capsules that are crushed may result in too much medicine or worse, a medication overdose.

## Keep a Current Medication and Health Record

- This record should include the names of all prescription and over-the-counter medications that are taken. The name, strength, how often you take these medications,

and the name of the doctor who wrote the prescription should also be included. Be sure to list any herbal or nutritional supplements as well.

- Share your personal medication record with any doctor or pharmacist you see. This is particularly important if you see two or more doctors or if you use more than one pharmacy. This record can help your health care professionals to prescribe and provide medications that will not cause problems with each other. By sharing this information, you can avoid problems.

### Carry a Medication/Health Card in Your Wallet

- A medication/health card should contain important facts about your health, for example, any health problems, the medications you take, and any medications that produce an allergic reaction.
- The card can be helpful if you are involved in an accident, you faint or blackout, or you are away from home and need medication. This card could save your life by informing medical professionals of your unique health needs.
- Consider wearing an Emergency Medical Identification bracelet if you know you have an allergic reaction to a particular medication or other substances (e.g., bee venom) or suffer from a specific disease, such as diabetes (high blood sugar).

### Use One Pharmacy

- Get all of your medications at the same pharmacy. This will help the pharmacist keep complete and up-to-date records of all your medications and be alert to possible problems.
- A pharmacist who knows your medication history can also tell you better about over-the-counter medications and herbal or vitamin supplements. Using one pharmacy is important if you are seeing more than one doctor and taking more than one medicine.
- If you move and change pharmacies, request a copy of your medication profile to take to your new pharmacist or physician.

### Medication “Don’ts”

1. **Do not share medications.** Sharing prescription medications is dangerous. What is safe and effective for one person may produce side effects, no relief, or a severe reaction for another person. As a result, never take medications prescribed for someone else or lend medications prescribed for you. Even if your symptoms appear the same, you may be suffering from an entirely different problem.
2. **Do not take medicines without checking the label.** Always be sure you are taking the right medicine by reading the label carefully before you take any. If it is dark in the room, turn on a light. If you need glasses to

- read, be sure to wear them to read the medication label.
3. **Do not use old or expired medicines.** Medications that are expired do not work as well and may cause a person to become ill. Be sure to check the expiration date on all medicines BEFORE you take them. Do the same with any herbal or vitamin supplements.
  4. **Do not dispose of medicines improperly.** Medication prescribed for a previous condition or that has expired or changed in color or odor should be disposed of. Do not flush old medicines down the toilet due to worry about medications polluting our waters. Call your local hazardous waste company or trash pick up service and ask how best to dispose of your unused medications. Ask your pharmacist about the safest way to dispose of needles and syringes. Do not throw these items in the garbage where they can injure someone.
  5. **Do not ask for refills.** Do not ask the pharmacist for a prescription refill that the doctor does not know about. Instead, consult with your doctor about your medicines every 3 to 6 months.
  6. **Do not store medications anywhere there is heat, light, or moisture (e.g., a window sill, above the oven, or in a bathroom).** Unless told to do something else, store medication in a cool, dry, and dark place, preferably at temperatures between 50 and 68 degrees F. Light, heat, and/or humidity are the “enemies” of most medication and can cause them to lose strength, disintegrate, or become dangerous due to a chemical change.

## Reference

*Senior Series Volume 2*, The Center on Rural Elderly, University of Missouri System.

Revised by Dr. Bella Mehta, PharmD (August 2007).

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