

## Medicines - safety issues

When used properly, medicines (including prescription, over-the-counter and complementary) help keep us well. However, about 140,000 Australians are admitted to hospital every year because of problems associated with the use of medicines, including side effects and other reactions. It is important to make sure you take your medicines correctly.

### Common causes of side effects

Some of the causes of side effects from medicines include:

- Failing to take the dose correctly -- for example, at the right time of day or with food or drinks
- Overdosing
- Allergies to chemical components of the medicine
- Combining the medicine with alcohol or certain foods – for example, some older types of antidepressants can cause life-threatening side effects when combined with cheeses and a range of other foods (and alcoholic drinks)
- Taking other medicines (including complementary or non-prescription medicines available for purchase over-the-counter), illicit drugs or other preparations that interact with the medicine
- Taking medicines stored at home but no longer prescribed
- Taking a medicine that was prescribed for someone else.

### Some conditions make side effects more likely

Always be guided by your doctor. It may not be advisable to take certain medicines if you:

- Drink heavily
- Are pregnant, breastfeeding or trying to conceive
- Are very young or elderly
- Are known to be allergic to particular medicines
- Have a stomach condition
- Have kidney, liver or cardiac (heart and blood vessel) disease.

### Ask your doctor or pharmacist

Make sure your doctor and other health professionals know about every medicine you take, including non-prescription and complementary medicines such as vitamin, mineral and herbal supplements. Mixing medicines can cause side effects.

When your doctor prescribes a medicine, or if you are buying an over-the-counter preparation from your pharmacy, questions you should ask include:

- What is the appropriate dosage – how much should I take, how often should I take it and at what times of day?
- Should I take the medicine on a full or empty stomach?
- Do I need to swallow the pills whole or can they be crushed or chewed?
- What should I do if I miss a dose?
- For how long should I take the medication?
- Are there problems with taking the medicine if I have a particular condition?
- What are the possible side effects, such as drowsiness, and how can I manage these?
- What are the signs and symptoms of serious reactions that I need to watch out for?

- Are there potential interactions with other medicines I take or may take?
- Can I have a Consumer Medicine Information leaflet?

## **Vitamin, mineral and herbal supplements (complementary medicines)**

General suggestions include:

- Tell your doctor and other health professionals about any supplements you are taking. Many herbal preparations are as powerful as pharmaceutical drugs and may cause side effects on their own or if used in combination with other medicines or in certain conditions.
- Unlike pharmaceutical drugs, the strength of herbal preparations may not be assured. Make sure you seek advice from a suitably qualified professional.
- Don't self-diagnose. See a health professional for diagnosis and treatment if you suspect you need to take supplements.
- Taking 'mega doses' of vitamins or minerals can be hazardous. Only use the recommended dose.
- Use all supplements strictly as directed or according to your health professional's recommendations.

## **General suggestions**

Suggestions on how to take your medicines safely include:

- If you are not certain that you can remember the dosage instructions, write them down, ask your pharmacist to write them down or ask your doctor or pharmacist about a dose administration aid (like a Dosette box). This is particularly important if you are taking more than one medicine.
- If your prescription medicines are crucial for your health and wellbeing, consider carrying a list of your medicines and their dosage instructions with you in case of an emergency or if you are admitted to hospital.
- Ask your doctor or pharmacist for a Consumer Medicine Information leaflet.
- Read the Consumer Medicine Information leaflet and all the labels on the container carefully before you use the medicine. They will tell you about your medicine and how to take it. Do this with every medicine.
- Regularly clear out your medicine cabinet and dispose of any medicine that is past its use-by date or that you no longer use. These medicines can be returned to your local community pharmacy for disposal.

## **Storage of medicines**

Suggestions include:

- Keep your medicines in their original containers.
- Don't remove the labels from containers – they include important instructions on how to store your medicine and expiry dates.
- Store medicines out of direct sunlight in a cool, dry place.
- Some medicines need to be refrigerated – if you leave them out of the fridge by accident or they freeze, check with your pharmacist whether they should be thrown out or used within a certain time.

## **Protect your children**

Children see adults taking pills and, given the opportunity, may take those pills themselves. Safety suggestions include:

- Ask your pharmacist to package your medicines in childproof containers, if possible.
- Keep medicines locked in cupboards or concealed in the fridge out of children's sight and reach.
- Only remove a medicine from its packaging when you are ready to take it – do not leave it lying around for a child to pick up and take.
- If your handbag contains medicines, make sure to keep your bag out of children's reach.

- Try to avoid taking tablets in front of your children, as they may want to imitate you.

## Where to get help

- In an emergency, call triple zero (000)
- Victorian Poisons Information Centre Tel. 131 126 – seven days a week, 24 hours a day – for advice about poisonings, suspected poisonings, bites and stings, mistakes with medicines and poisoning prevention advice
- Adverse Medicines Events (AME) Line Tel. 1300 134 237 – to report a problem with your medicine
- Medicines Line (Australia) Tel. 1300 MEDICINE (1300 633 424) – for information on prescription, over-the-counter and complementary medicines
- Your doctor
- Your pharmacist.

## Things to remember

- Some of the causes of serious side effects include taking the medicines incorrectly, combining them with alcohol or using medicines prescribed for someone else.
- Make sure your doctor and other health professionals know about every medicine you take, including prescription, non-prescription and over-the-counter medicines, and complementary medicines such as vitamin, mineral and herbal supplements.
- Keep all medicines out of children's reach.
- Dispose of unwanted or out-of-date medicines by returning them to your local community pharmacy – never give any of your medicines to other people.

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