

Medicines - side effects

Unwanted side effects or adverse reactions can be caused by all kinds of medicines, including prescription and over-the-counter medicines, complementary medicines including herbal preparations, vitamins and some products dispensed by naturopaths and other practitioners of complementary medicine.

It's estimated that around 140,000 Australians are hospitalised every year because of problems associated with the use of medicines, including side effects such as adverse reactions. Death can also occur in severe cases. It is in your best interests to manage your medicines wisely. See your doctor or pharmacist for further information and advice.

Prescription medicines can cause unwanted side effects

All medicines can cause unwanted side effects. For example, antibiotics such as those in the sulphonamide and penicillin families cause allergic reactions in around five per cent of the population. Skin rashes are a common reaction. However, it may be the illness or the medicines that are to blame for the reaction, and telling the difference is tricky. A further complication is the interaction of any other medicines, including complementary medicines, which the person may be taking.

Complementary medicines can cause side effects too

About 60 per cent of Australians use complementary medicines at least once per year. Many people believe that alternative or complementary preparations, such as herbal remedies, are safer because they are derived from natural sources. This isn't always true. Some herbs can act on the body as powerfully as any pharmaceutical medicine, and unwanted side effects can occur.

Examples of adverse reactions include:

- **Echinacea** – over 20 adverse reactions have been reported, including asthma attacks, hives, swelling, aching muscles and gastrointestinal upsets.
- **Feverfew** – pregnant women are cautioned against using this herb, as it can trigger uterine contractions. In animal experiments, the use of feverfew was found to trigger spontaneous abortions (miscarriages).
- **Asteraceae plants** – which include feverfew, Echinacea, dandelion and chamomile. Adverse reactions include allergic dermatitis and hay fever.

Complementary medicines can interact with pharmaceutical medicines

About 20 per cent of Australians are thought to take complementary medicines and pharmaceutical medicines at the same time. This increases the risk of adverse reactions, because the active ingredients in the various preparations can 'clash'. Known examples of medicine interactions include the following:

- Echinacea, chamomile and milk thistle can act upon liver enzymes and reduce the efficacy of pharmaceutical medicines or increase the risk of side effects.
- Feverfew and chamomile can increase the risk of bleeding in people who are taking blood-thinning medicines such as Warfarin.
- St John's Wort is known to provoke breakthrough bleeding in women who take the oral contraceptive pill.
- St John's Wort may interfere with the efficacy of psychotropic medicines such as the selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs) that are used for the treatment of depression. The use of these medicines together has been associated with serotonin syndrome, which can range in severity from mild to life-threatening.

Alcohol can also cause adverse reactions

Consuming alcohol with some medicines can also cause unwanted and sometimes dangerous side effects. These effects include drowsiness with antihistamines or antidepressant medicines. This can be particularly important for drivers.

What to do if you experience an adverse reaction

Suggestions include:

- Take a note of what you believe are adverse reactions. See your doctor immediately.
- If your symptoms are diagnosed as adverse reactions, the use of the medicine may be stopped and the doctor will warn you against using this medicine again in future.
- You will most likely be prescribed a different medicine.
- Desensitisation therapy will help in the case where another medicine can't be substituted.
- Advice can be sought from the Adverse Medicines Events Line by phoning 1300 134 237. This line allows consumers to report or receive advice on adverse medicines events.

See over ...

Suggestions to reduce the risk of adverse reactions

Suggestions include:

- Take all medicines strictly as prescribed. Adverse reactions can be caused by taking medication incorrectly.
- Don't take anyone else's medicines.
- Learn about your medication. All prescription medicines have an information leaflet called Consumer Medicine Information (CMI). This includes detailed information on the medicine in plain English, including use, side effects and precautions.
- Avoid self-treating your ailments with over-the-counter preparations. See your doctor or pharmacist for proper diagnosis and treatment.
- Tell your doctor about all the medicines you take, including prescription, over-the-counter and complementary medicines.
- Have an annual review of all the medicines you take. For the elderly, frequent reviews are essential because, as we age, we are more likely to have unwanted effects from medicines. Any medicines considered no longer necessary should be stopped.
- Return unwanted and out of date medicines to your local community pharmacy for environmentally safe disposal. This service is provided free of charge.
- Ask your doctor if you need a Home Medicines Review. A pharmacist will review all the medicines you take. One of the goals this review is to prevent medicine related problems.
- Feel free to consult your pharmacist who can also advise you about adverse medicine reactions.
- Talk to your pharmacist about dosage aids that can help you organise your pill taking. You may be at risk of making mistakes if you take many different medicines at different times.
- Ask your doctor if improving your lifestyle could reduce your need for medication. Some conditions can be better managed with changes to your diet and regular exercise.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Your pharmacist
- Adverse Drug Reactions, Therapeutic Goods Administration Tel. 1800 044 114
- Adverse Medicines Events (AME) Line Tel. 1300 134 237
- Medicines Line – information on prescription, over-the-counter and complementary medicines Tel. 1300 888 763

Things to remember

- Unwanted side effects or adverse reactions can be caused by all kinds of medicines, including prescription and over-the-counter medicines, and complementary medicines such as herbal preparations and vitamins.
- Taking complementary medicines and pharmaceutical medicines at the same time increases the risk of adverse reactions, because the active ingredients in the various preparations can 'clash'.
- Tell your doctor about all the various medicines you are taking, including prescription, over-the-counter and complementary. You may like to have an annual review of all the medicines you are taking.

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