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## Safe medication use

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### Summary

- Understand why you are taking your medication, how to take it, how to store it and what to do if you have unexpected or serious side effects by discussing this with your doctor or pharmacist.
  - The most common reason for unexpected side effects is not taking medication correctly. Make sure you take your medication exactly the way your doctor or pharmacist advises you to and for as long as they tell you to.
  - Tell your doctor about all the medication you are taking, including prescription, over-the-counter, vitamins and herbal supplements, as they may cause side effects or more serious problems.
  - Throw out any out-of-date medication you have at home and never take someone else's prescription medication or share your own with someone else
  - Any pharmacist can dispose of any unwanted medicines safely.
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Medication must be used properly to help avoid problems such as unwanted effects and other adverse reactions. It is important to understand your medication instructions to make sure you take them correctly.

If you have a severe reaction to any medication, seek medical help immediately.

### Read and follow your medication instructions

Medication instructions tell you exactly what the medication is designed to treat, how and when you should take it, where to store it and what side effects have been reported. They also advise of any contraindications (situations when a medication, procedure or surgery should not be used because it may be harmful to you).

This information can be provided to you by your doctor and pharmacist, and in the information page provided inside most medication packaging, as well as in Consumer Medicine Information (CMI) leaflets about your specific medication.

When your doctor prescribes medication, or if you are buying over-the-counter products from your pharmacy, you should ask:

- What is the effect of taking this medicine? How will it help me?
- How much should I take, how often and at what time of the day? What should I do if I miss a dose?
- Should I take the medication with or without food?
- Can I crush or chew the medication, or do I need to swallow it whole? How long should I take the medication for?
- Do I need to finish all the medication?
- What is the active ingredient in this medication?
- Is there a generic brand I could try (to save money) or another alternative if I do not respond well to this one?
- What are the possible side effects, and how can I manage them?
- What should I do if I have a reaction to the medication (for example, rash, fever, headaches)?
- Could this medication affect or be affected by other therapies or medication I am taking?
- Are there any long-term impacts from taking this medication?

### Taking your medication safely

Your doctor will monitor your prescription medication, but you need to make sure you follow your medication instructions, including:

- Take all medication exactly as instructed by your doctor or pharmacist.
- Do not take medication prescribed for someone else.
- Learn about your medication and know the importance of taking your medicine correctly. Ask your pharmacist for a Consumer Medicine Information (CMI) leaflet, which answers common questions about your medication (or look for it online as many drug companies publish them on the web).
- When buying over-the-counter medication, ask your pharmacist about side effects and interactions with other medication (including vitamins and herbal supplements) you are taking.
- If you are not confident that you will remember the instructions for taking the medication (such as dosage and time of day), write them down, or ask your doctor or pharmacist to write them down.
- If you are taking multiple medications or find you are forgetting if you have taken a dose, talk to your pharmacist about dosage aids (such as a Dosette box, which makes it easy to divide your medication into days of the week. Some include times of day as well).
- Ask your doctor if making changes to your lifestyle (such as diet and exercise) could reduce your need for medication.
- Ask your doctor if you may benefit from a Home Medicines Review. This is where a pharmacist reviews all the medication you take, and it can be done annually. You may be able to stop taking medication you no longer need.
- Throw out unwanted and out-of-date medication, as the active ingredient may no longer be effective. You can also return it to your pharmacy for safe disposal.
- Do not stop taking a prescribed medication without discussing it with your doctor. If it is not working for you, speak with your doctor about an alternative.

### **Storing medication safely**

Some medication can deteriorate if it is stored in an area that is exposed to sunlight, too hot or has too much moisture (such as a bathroom). Some medication (for example, some probiotics and eye drops) needs to be stored in the fridge. Ask your pharmacist about any special storage instructions.

Regularly check the use-by dates on your medication (including prescription, non-prescription and complementary medicines) and throw out any that have expired.

### **Medication side effects – common causes**

Some of the common causes of side effects from medication include:

- not taking the correct dose – such as taking too much or too little
- not taking it the right way – such as without food or at the wrong time of day
- allergic reactions to the chemicals in the medication
- mixing the medication with alcohol
- mixing one type of medication with another – this includes over-the-counter medication, vitamins and herbal supplements, prescription and non-prescription therapies and illegal drugs
- taking out-of-date medication or medication you no longer need
- taking someone else's prescription medication.

Some medication can cause problems in people with other conditions. Before taking any new medication or therapy, let your doctor or pharmacist know if you:

- are taking any other medication, including over-the-counter medication, vitamins and herbal supplements, prescription and non-prescription therapies and illegal drugs
- drink heavily
- are pregnant, breastfeeding or trying to conceive
- are allergic to a particular medication
- have a stomach condition
- have kidney, liver or cardiac (heart and blood vessel) disease.

All medication has the potential to cause unwanted side effects. Skin rashes and nausea are common reactions. However, whether a reaction is caused by the medication or the illness that it is used to treat can sometimes be difficult to tell.

### **Complementary medicines**

Many people believe that alternative or complementary preparations, such as herbal remedies, are safer because they are derived from natural sources. This is not always true. Some herbs can act on the body as powerfully as any conventional medicine, and complementary medicines can interact with pharmaceutical medication.

Before starting any new therapy (prescribed, over-the-counter or herbal supplements), let your doctor or pharmacist know about the other therapies you are already taking. This will make sure that you do not mix potentially dangerous chemicals in your body.

### **Mixing alcohol and medication**

Drinking alcohol with some medication can also cause unwanted and sometimes dangerous side effects, such as drowsiness with some antihistamines or antidepressant medication. This can be particularly important for drivers to consider.

### **Photosensitivity from medication**

Some medication can cause photosensitivity, meaning that it can quickly cause a reaction on your skin similar to sunburn when you go out in the sun. Medication that may cause this includes some antibiotics, some antidepressants, some antihistamines and some chemotherapy drugs, but not every person who uses these medications will have a reaction.

### **What to do if you experience side effects**

**If you have a severe reaction to any medication, seek medical help immediately.**

If you experience mild side effects that your doctor or pharmacist have not warned you about, do not stop the medication before speaking with your doctor. It may simply be a case of adjusting the type or dosage, or there may be something else causing the symptoms.

If you are particularly concerned and cannot reach your doctor, call the NPS Medicines Line on 1300 633 424 or the Adverse Medicines Events Line on 1300 134 237 for advice.

### **Where to get help**

- Your doctor
- Pharmacist
- NPS Medicines Line call 1300 633 424
- Adverse Medicines Events Line call 1300 134 237

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