

Top Ten Medicine Tips When Caring for Older Adults

If you care for aging parents or another older family member, taking the steps below can help prevent medication use problems. As always, be sure to read and re-read the instructions for OTC and prescription medicines.

- 1. Ask the doctor or pharmacist** before the person you care for takes any new over-the-counter (OTC) medicines as some can be harmful to older adults.
- 2. Make sure one healthcare provider is in charge of coordinating medical care and keeping track** of your loved one's medicines to check for potential drug-drug interactions and other risks associated with taking multiple medications. Medicines for one problem can sometimes worsen another health condition.
- 3. Share an up-to-date list of all medicines (OTCs and prescriptions) and dietary supplements** at each visit. Ask the doctor to review this list periodically to see whether any medicines are 1) not needed, 2) unnecessarily unsafe (a safer alternative is available, or if there is a possible interaction with another medicine or dietary supplement), or 3) the dose is too high. Make sure you and your loved one understand the reason for taking each medicine.
- 4. Keep medicines in one location** (away from children and pets) unless any need to be refrigerated. Some older adults have trouble opening child safety caps, so you may need to ask the doctor or pharmacist how to make it easier.
- 5. Suggest a pillbox or reminders** if you think the person you are caring for needs help remembering how and when to take medicines. Taking medications at a set time each day (at breakfast or bedtime), setting a timer, placing pill bottles in an obvious location (although away from pets and grandchildren), using pillboxes for complicated regimens (especially for people who have difficulty opening pill bottles) or posting a medication checklist and schedule on the refrigerator are all helpful strategies.
- 6. Pay attention to any adverse reactions to a medicine.** If you notice signs or symptoms that your loved one may not have taken a medicine correctly, call the doctor or nurse. Things to watch for include difficulty breathing or swelling of the throat (call 9-1-1 right away), hallucinations, severe confusion, dizziness, falls, unusual bleeding or bruising, extreme difficulty waking up, blurred vision or hives or rashes, among others.
- 7. Ask for clarification.** Some drug regimens can be very complicated, especially if the person is on multiple medications. Be sure your loved one knows when to take each medicine (and at what dose). For example, what does "take three times a day" mean, every 24 hours, or throughout the day? If appropriate, you may want to ask whether there are simpler ways to take multiple medications.
- 8. Ask your healthcare provider for an e-prescription.** Instead of writing out your prescription on a piece of paper, your doctor, physician assistant and/or nurse enters it directly into his or her computer. The prescription is then sent from your doctor's computer to the pharmacy's computer, saving you the extra trip to the pharmacy to drop off the paper prescription. Your health team can also more easily monitor your medications and even select drugs that are covered by your family's health plan.
- 9. Ask if any monitoring tests are needed** to check how the medicine is working in the body, such as liver or kidney function tests. Make sure to schedule and keep these lab appointments, and make sure that your doctor has received the results of your latest lab test before making any changes to your prescription.
- 10. Go with your loved one to the doctor's appointment** to offer support and to ask questions, relay information about his or her condition, as well as any medication problems or concerns you have. Be sure to take notes.