

Questions to Ask Your Healthcare Team About Prescription Drugs

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Discuss the
Benefits
and Risks of
Prescription
Medicines



NCPIE resources to encourage communication about the benefits and potential risks of prescribed medications.

Americans take a lot of medications. Almost 70 percent of people take at least one prescription drug, and more than half take two drugs, according to a [Mayo Clinic](#) study. Twenty percent of people — especially those ages 65 years and older — take five or more different prescription drugs. Along with prescription medications, people also use a variety of over-the-counter products, such as cough and cold remedies, sleep aids, vitamins, minerals, and herbal supplements.

Prescription medications can help treat both short-term health problems and long-term conditions like heart disease, depression, and chronic pain. Yet not all prescription medicines are necessary, and they can all cause side effects. In fact, reactions to drugs cause nearly [one-third](#) of all hospitalizations in elderly people. Most Americans — [6 out of 10](#) — aren't aware of the risks associated with their medications.

Your doctor, pharmacist, and other healthcare professionals are your best allies in helping you understand and manage your medications. You can talk to them about any questions or concerns you have.

Before your appointment

You can get a head start by preparing for a conversation about your medication before you go. Doctors typically have only 15 minutes to meet with each person. Knowing what you want to discuss beforehand can save time and ensures that you don't forget anything.

Write down any symptoms or medical problems you've been having. Include the length of time you've had them and any questions you want to ask. Bring an up-to-date list of all of the prescription and over-the-counter medications that you take. Include vitamins, minerals, and herbal supplements.

Bring something you can take notes with, like pen and paper or a smartphone or tablet. If your doctor gives you a diagnosis, write down the health condition. If you don't understand what the doctor or pharmacist is saying, ask questions. You may want to bring a family member or friend to take notes and help you ask questions. You can also print [this resource](#) to remind you what information you need and to help keep you organized.

Questions to ask about medications

If a medication is prescribed for you, make sure you know:

- the benefits and potential risks of the medicine
- what it does
- how to take it
- what side effects it can cause and what to do if a side effect occurs

Here are some questions to help you fully understand your medication. You can ask your doctor and pharmacist before you take the medication home.

About the drug and how it works

- What is the name of the medication?
- What condition does it treat?
- How does the drug work?
- Is it a brand-name medication or generic medication? Does it matter which one I take?
- Is there written information I can read about it?

About taking the medication

- How do I take it?
- How many times per day should I take it?
- At what time(s) of the day should I take it? Morning or night? Should I take it with food or on an empty stomach?
- For how long will I need to take it?

About knowing if the drug is working

- How will I know if the drug is working?
- When should I call you if I don't think the medication is working?
- Do I need to schedule follow-up visits to make sure the drug is working?

About possible interactions and activities to avoid

- Should I avoid any activities, such as driving, while I'm taking this medication?
- Do I need to avoid alcohol while I take it?
- Can the drug interact with any foods or drinks?
- Can it interact with any other prescription or over-the-counter drugs or supplements I take?

About side effects

- What side effects can this medication cause?
- What should I do if I have side effects?
- Which side effects should I call you about?
- Will I need tests — for example, to check my liver or kidney function —while I'm on this drug?

About storage and disposal

- Where should I keep the medication?
- Does it need to be refrigerated?
- What is the best way to dispose of any unused medication?

To learn more about your medications and how to avoid harmful drug reactions, visit:

- [Talk Before You Take](#)
- [Make Notes & Take Notes](#)



NCPIE focuses on medication safety issues like adherence, preventing abuse, reducing errors, and better communication.

Article Resources

American Society of Consultant Pharmacists. (n.d.). ASCP fact sheet. Retrieved from <https://www.ascp.com/articles/about-ascp/ascp-fact-sheet>

National Council on Patient Information and Education. (n.d.). Make notes & take notes before, during, and after my doctor's visit: Helpful steps to avoid medication errors. Retrieved from http://talkaboutrx.org/assocdocs/TASK/269/make_notes.pdf

National Council on Patient Information and Education. (n.d.). Talk before you take: 10 questions to ask about the medicines you take. Retrieved from http://www.talkbeforeyoutake.org/assets/10-questions_tbyt_news_article.pdf

Nearly 7 in 10 Americans take prescription drugs, Mayo Clinic, Olmsted Medical Center find. (2013, June 19). Retrieved from <http://newsnetwork.mayoclinic.org/discussion/nearly-7-in-10-americans-take-prescription-drugs-mayo-clinic-olmsted-medical-center-find/>

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