


MEDICATION Safety




By Anne Frost, PhD

Project Community has been supporting community health for 35 years. In our new "Knowledge to Navigate" series, we address challenges our communities are facing, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. In the third article of our series, Medication Safety, we are sharing our health care expertise and guidance to support the healthy use of medications.



Incorrect medication use costs \$3.5 billion dollars a year to treat (CDC). Such accidents are preventable and increase the cost of health care for everyone. Insurance premiums and cost of care go up for everyone, not just the person who took the medication incorrectly.



Serious harm may be the result of medication errors from both prescribed and over-the-counter (OTC) medications. Incorrect medication use is the cause of approximately 1.3 million emergency department visits every year, with 350,000 of those visits resulting in hospitalization for further treatment. Older adults, 65 and older, visit emergency departments 450,000 times per year, over two times as often as younger people. Children make up about 200,000 of the annual visits, with 50,000 of them under the age of five (CDC).

Medication safety is of utmost importance. In order to protect yourselves, and those you care for, it is important to read the labels before taking medications. Check to see that you have the right medication, the right dose, and are taking it at the right time. Also, make sure you are taking it by the correct route (for example topically or by mouth). Lastly, make sure it hasn't expired.

Our "Knowledge to Navigate Medication Safety Chart" is a valuable guide to learning about medication safety. It was developed by Anne Frost, PhD, RN, consultation by Bridget Messina, MS, RN and Elaine Pottenger, MS, RN. Technical advisement was provided by Julianne Annunziata Peters. Dr. Frost has a varied career in medical, surgical, and psychiatric care. She is a founder, and President of Project Community, Inc.

To learn more about Project Community and their programs, please visit ProjectCommunity.us



YOUR
GUIDE TO

Medication Safety



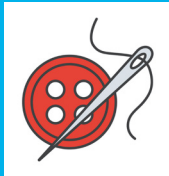
Honesty is the best policy.

Prescription, OTC, Vitamins: Tell your health care provider about every single drug you take (prescription & over-the-counter, as well as vitamins and supplements) in order to avoid dangerous interactions or the possibility that one good effect will cancel the other. Keep an updated list to bring to your health care provider.



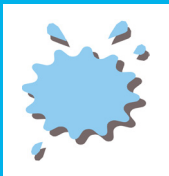
Neither a borrower nor lender be.

Individual Differences: Don't share medications with anyone even though it appears that you have the same symptoms. Others might be on medications that interfere with the one that you lend them. Medications that are safe for adults may be lethal for children.



A stitch in time saves nine.

Side Effects: Call your health care provider at the first sign of a problem. Do not rely on internet or other sources which may not be specific to your situation. For example, a rash can indicate a drug allergy. Don't wait to see if it clears up on its own. The drug may need to be stopped and a new one started.



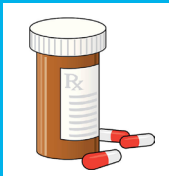
Water, water everywhere but never near a sink.

Alters Meds: Do not store medications in humid places, such as a bathroom medicine cabinet or near steam from food cooking on a stove. The moisture can alter the medication's formula and effectiveness. Keep medication in a cool, dry place, out of the reach of children.



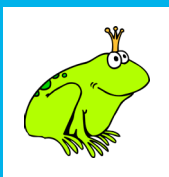
Go the distance.

Finish Prescription: There is a specific reason why a medication is given for a particular length of time. Feeling better may be a direct result of taking this medication. But in order for the effectiveness to last, the full prescription must be taken. Some chronic conditions require ongoing medication in order to keep you feeling good. Trying to save some of the medications for later use can result in expiration and ineffectiveness.



More is not always better.

Toxic: Increasing the recommended dosage can be dangerous. Seniors are more likely to need decreased dosages to avoid toxic levels. Your health care provider takes this into account when providing medications for you. The same is true for over-the-counter drugs.



Looks can be deceiving.

Color: Color does not determine the function of a medication. For example, aspirin and Tylenol with codeine are both white. However, both medications are very different. Take note of the color, shape, size, and any markings that identify your usual medication.

YOUR GUIDE TO MEDICATION SAFETY (CONTINUED)



It takes two to tango.

Liver/Kidney: The liver and kidneys prevent the body from being poisoned. The liver breaks down medications and other toxins while the kidneys eliminate them from the body. With age, the efficiency of these organs diminishes. The use of alcohol in combination with certain medications can cause permanent damage.



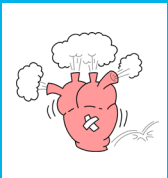
Less is more.

Vitamins: Vitamins are essential to life, but too much, or in combination with certain medications, can be toxic. Before supplementing your diet with vitamins make sure you ask your health care provider.



Don't judge a book by its cover.

Medication Ingredients: Over-the-counter medications may not always be safe for an individual's particular needs. They may interfere with the effectiveness of prescribed medications. Additionally, over-the-counter products may contain multiple medications. This is true of certain remedies for colds.



Where there's smoke, there's fire.

Heart/Indigestion: It can be hard to distinguish simple heartburn from gastrointestinal reflux disease, angina, or a heart attack. If you experience pain or burning in your chest, you should seek medical attention. Many people self-diagnose and self-medicate, taking repeated doses of antacids for what they think is heartburn when they are actually having a heart attack.



Don't blow it out of proportion.

Antihistamines: Over-the-counter medications can have dangerous side effects. For example, antihistamines can affect conditions such as emphysema, glaucoma, ulcer, and kidney or heart disease.



Run for cover.

Antibiotics & Steroids: Medications like antibiotics and topical steroids can increase sensitivity to the sun's rays, even on a cloudy day. It is important to use sunblock and wear clothing to protect your skin and prevent cancer.



Monkey see, monkey do.

Herbal Supplements: Herbal products can cause side effects as well as interfere with medications. Herbal teas can act as diuretics. Echinacea, used for boosting the immune system, can have the opposite effect if used in excess. Discuss the use of herbals with your health care provider as possible overmedication may occur.