

4 Medication Safety Tips for Older Adults

Whether you're settling into your sixties or heading into your ninth decade, be careful when taking prescription and over-the-counter medicines, herbal preparations, and supplements. And if you're caring for older loved ones, help them stay safe, too.

Why the special concern? The older you get, the more likely you are to use additional medicines, which can increase the chance of harmful drug effects, including interactions. And, as you age, physical changes can affect the way medicines are handled by your body, leading to potential complications. For instance, your liver and kidneys may not work as well, which affects how a drug breaks down and leaves your body.

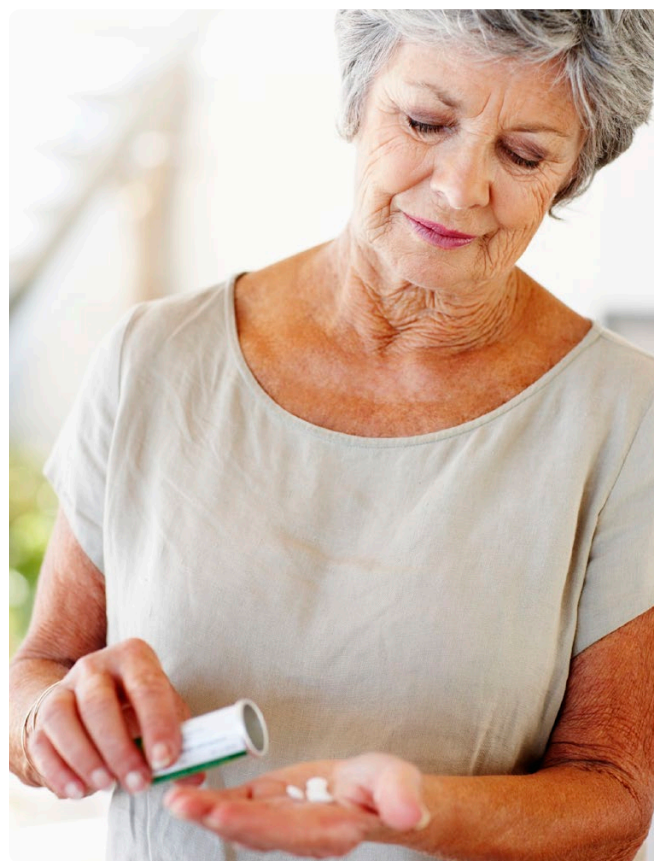
"There is no question that physiology changes as we age. Many chronic medical conditions don't even appear until our later years," explains RADM (Ret.) Sandra L. Kweder, M.D., F.A.C.P., a medical officer at the U.S. Food and Drug Administration. "It's not that people are falling to pieces; some changes are just part of the normal aging process."

Read on for important safety tips.

1. Take Medicine as Prescribed—with Input from Your Health Care Provider

Take your medicine regularly and according to your health care provider's instructions.

Don't take prescription medications that your health care provider has not prescribed for you. And don't skip doses or stop taking medication without first consulting with your provider. (This holds true even if you're feeling better or if you think the medicine isn't working). And if you're having bothersome side effects or have other ques-



tions, talk to your provider.

"Medication can't work unless you take it," Kweder says. "For instance, medications that treat chronic conditions such as high blood pressure and diabetes typically only work when taken regularly and as directed. You have to take them continuously to maintain control over your condition."

Dosing for medications is based on clinical trials,

which the FDA reviews. “Every medicine is really different and is dosed according to what’s been tested,” says Kweder, which is one reason why you shouldn’t select a dose yourself.

2. Keep a Medication List

Write down what you’re taking and keep the list with you. Make sure your medication list is up-to-date, and includes any changes made by your health care provider. Consider giving a copy to a friend or loved one that you trust—important especially in case of emergency and when you’re traveling.

Your list should include the medicine’s brand name, if applicable, and generic name. Also write down why you’re taking each medication, the dosage (for instance, 300 mg), and how often you take it.

3. Be Aware of Potential Drug Interactions and Side Effects

Interactions can occur when:

- One drug affects how another drug works;
- A medical condition you have makes a certain drug potentially harmful;
- An herbal preparation or supplement affects the action of a drug;
- A food or non-alcoholic drink reacts with a drug;
- An alcoholic drink interacts with a drug.

Your task? Learn about possible interactions and the potential side effects of your medications. You can do this by carefully reading drug facts labels on over-the-counter drugs (OTC) and the information that comes with your prescription medications, and by reviewing any special instructions with your health care provider. For instance, nitroglycerin, which treats angina (chest pain related to heart disease), should not be taken with many erectile dysfunction drugs, including Viagra and Cialis, because serious interactions can occur. Some drugs should not be taken with alcohol, as problems such as loss of coordination, memory problems, sleepiness, and falls can result.

If you’re seeing more than one health care provider, tell each one about all medications, herbal preparations, and supplements you take. You also can ask your pharmacist about potential drug interactions and side effects.

Some medications can cause side effects similar to health problems that occur in older adults (such as mem-

ory difficulties), so ask your healthcare provider if any new health problems you are experiencing could be due to medications.

4. Review Medications with Your Health Care Provider


Ideally, you should discuss the prescription and over-the-counter medications and dietary supplements that you take with your health care provider at each visit. Do this to confirm if the medications are still necessary and if the supplements are appropriate—and to determine which ones you can stop taking (if any).

If it’s not possible to review medications at each visit, schedule at least one review each year.

If a certain medication seems out of your budget, ask your health care provider if there is a less expensive, and still effective, alternative. Also tell your health care provider if you think a medication isn’t working well (for example, if a medication is not relieving pain like you think it should).

A medication review with your health care provider can help you avoid drug interactions, reduce your risk for side effects, and lessen costs.

Sometimes, especially if you’re seeing multiple providers, certain questions can fall through the cracks, says Kweder. But, she says, there is no such thing as a stupid question about medicine.

“As a society, we have become reliant on pharmaceuticals to help us attain a longer and higher-quality life. It’s a wonderful success of Western medicine,” she adds. “The goal should be for each of us to access that benefit but respect that medicines are serious business. To get the most out of them, you should take them with great care and according to directions.” 

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