

Taking Hold of Your Medications

Older adults are more likely than any other age group to take multiple prescription medications. One study showed that 83% of adults ages 60-79 took at least one prescription drug and 34% of adults ages 60-79 took at least five different prescription drugs within the past 30 days. Polypharmacy, or the regular use of five or more medications, can significantly impact their quality of life.

This fact sheet will provide information and tools to help understand more about managing your medication use.

Polypharmacy

Definition: The regular use of at least several (often defined as five or more) medications.

- Multiple medications may be necessary to treat and/or prevent health issues.
- Inappropriate polypharmacy can occur however, especially if medication usage is not monitored closely.

Risk Factors for Inappropriate Polypharmacy

- Taking multiple medications for multiple chronic diseases as well as for the same disease or symptom
- Lack of regular monitoring of medication usage and side effects
- Seeing multiple health care providers who can prescribe medication for you
 - Some health care providers may not have your updated medication list in their records, so they may not consider side effects or drug interactions when prescribing.
- Lack of communication among your health care providers
- Using multiple pharmacies to fill your prescriptions
 - Each pharmacy you use may not have a complete, updated list of your medications in their records. Because of this, the pharmacists may not be able to identify potential side effects or harmful drug interactions when filling your medications.
- Usage of automatic refill services
 - While automatic refill services can be very helpful, it is important to keep track of which of your medications are on automatic refill. If your medications change, be sure to update the automatic refill service.

Preventing Polypharmacy

- Keep a current list of your medications and bring this to every physician visit
- Request a review of your medications with your physician or pharmacist
- Ensure that you and/or your loved one understand the purpose and dosage of each medication you take, including over-the-counter drugs, herbals, vitamins, and supplements

Medication Compliance

Definition: Taking your medications as ordered by your health care provider. This is also known as “medication adherence.”

- It is estimated that over half of prescribed medications for chronic diseases, including high blood pressure, diabetes, asthma, and heart failure, are not taken as directed. Patients may not understand the potential damage that can be done to their health by not taking their medications as directed.

Common Reasons for Medication Noncompliance

- Forgetting to take the medications
- Similar-looking medications (i.e. multiple small, round, white pills)
- Difficulty opening the pill bottle, often due to child-resistant packaging
- Lack of understanding of why you are taking the medication
- Uncertainty that the drug is working
- Feeling “fine” and assuming you no longer need to take the drug, without consulting your health care provider
- Experiencing or fear of experiencing negative side effects from the drugs
- High cost of medications

Ways to Improve Medication Compliance

- Use a pill box to organize your medications
 - Use alarms or medication reminder apps
 - Use a calendar, check list, or other type of record to keep track of when you take your medications
- Keep an updated list of your current medications that includes:
 - Drug name
 - Dosage and frequency
 - Reason for use
 - Additional instructions (such as take with food, sit up for 30 minutes after dose, etc.)



- Ask your pharmacy not to use child-resistant packaging
- For expensive medications, consider shopping around or seeking assistance through a medication management clinic
- Keep track of any side effects you may experience, and be sure to address them with your health care provider

Communication with Your Health Care Providers

Communication with your health care providers is essential to ensuring that your medical needs are being addressed. However, this can be challenging – but don't be afraid to be your own advocate.

In the best-case scenario, all of your health care providers would either be within the same health care system and/or use the same electronic medical records system. This allows for easier access of your medical records, including prescriptions and medications.

For many people though, this is often not the case, and they may see providers across multiple health care systems. When you have a doctor's appointment, particularly for specialists such as cardiologists, neurologists, etc., make sure you bring your current medication list for them to review. Do not be afraid to ask questions and bring up concerns or things you don't understand.

It is okay to be a "squeaky wheel" to ensure that your needs and concerns are being addressed! Being an advocate for yourself and your loved ones, through regular communication with your health care providers (including pharmacists) is key to improving quality of life.