

Managing Multiple Medications in Later Life

(Not as Easy as It Would Seem)

New medications, along with other advances in modern medicine, undoubtedly are allowing many people to live longer and with a better quality of life. But along with these advances have come unintended consequences causing:



A Serious New Public Health Problem

- Medication-related problems are now reportedly the third or fourth leading cause of death in the over-65 age group;
- Medication problems can cause needless disability, falls, confusion, depression and loss of independence;
- The cost of treating problems caused by medications may be as high as \$60 billion annually in the United States—as much as the cost of treating Alzheimer’s, cancer, heart disease and diabetes.

Inside this guide



- Medication Problems Common to Older Adults
- Side Effects: Unintended & Unwanted
- Communicating with Your Doctor and Your Pharmacist
- Medication Errors at Home
- Unaffordable Medications

On the back of this guide

A Blank Medication Chart for Your Use

This guide is published by the Tompkins County Office for the Aging.

(The information presented is offered for educational and informational purposes only, and should not be considered as personal medical advice. Consult your physician or pharmacist for advice about the most appropriate use of medications for your particular situation.)

Medication Related Problems

The nation's \$100 billion "disease", is in urgent need of further attention from health care professionals, elected officials, policy makers, researchers, the pharmaceutical industry, and the public. While many medication related problems are unpredictable, recent evidence suggests that a host of medication related problems can be anticipated and prevented. Medication related death, illness, and disability frequently result from a number of controllable factors including under-use of medications, overuse of medications, use of inappropriate medications, adverse drug reactions (including drug interactions), and lack of adherence to drug therapy (patient noncompliance) according to The American Society of Consultant Pharmacists web page.



Category	Definition
Untreated Medical Problem	Patient has a medical problem that requires medication therapy but is not receiving a medication for that problem. In the older population incontinence, heart failure, and depression are grossly under treated and vaccines are dramatically underused even though we know that immunization saves lives, reduces morbidity, and saves money.
Improper Medication Selection	Patient has a medical problem that requires medication therapy but is taking the wrong medication, a non-drug therapy is appropriate or a safer and/or less costly medication is available.
Too Little Medication	Patient has a medical problem that is being treated with too little of the correct medication or taking less medication than prescribed, possibly due to sharing medications.
Failure to Receive Medication	Patient has a medical problem but is not receiving the prescribed medication or fails to take the medication. May be due to unclear or misunderstood directions, inability to comply, or the high cost of medication.
Too Much Medication	Patient has a medical problem that is being treated with too much of the correct medication. This may give rise to potentially troubling side effects and also increases the cost of treatment.
Adverse Drug Reaction	Patient has a medical problem that is the result of an adverse drug effect, allergy to medicine or possible – often unpredictable – individual side effect.
Drug Interaction	Patient has a medical problem that is the result of a drug-drug, drug-food, or other interaction.
Medication Use With No Indication	Patient is taking a medication for no medically valid reason. The problem occurs commonly with the use of antibiotics, certain gastrointestinal medications and often with sleep medications and other sedatives.

(Adapted from the American Society of Consultant Pharmacists, and American Society of the Aging web pages).

Unintended Effects of Medications

“...Any symptom in an elderly patient should be considered a drug side effect until proven otherwise...” (Gurwitz, J., Polypharmacy, 1997)

Take the Following Quiz:

(Check One)

Yes	No	Your Medications Record
		Do you have a complete list of all medications you are taking: including prescription and over-the-counter medications, herbals and vitamins?
		Are you taking medications prescribed by more than one health professional?
		Do each of your physicians know about all the above medications you are taking?
		Does your pharmacist have a complete record of all the above medications?

If you do not have a written list of all medications you are taking, make a list before answering the following group of questions. If you wish, you can use the chart on the back of this guide.

Yes	Not Sure about These	For Each of the Medications You Are Taking
		Do you know why you have to take it?
		Have you been prescribed any medication to deal with the side effect of an earlier prescribed medication?
		Do you know the common side effects associated with each of the medications you are taking?
		Do you know if you should take it with or without food?
		Do you know if you should avoid taking it at the same time as certain other medications or supplements that may affect how the medication is absorbed (such as calcium supplements)?
		Have you been instructed on what to do if you miss taking a dose?
		Do you know which medicines (including over-the-counter, herbals, vitamins, alcohol) are to be avoided since you are taking this medication?
		Have you spoken to your physician about any symptoms that may be associated with this medication (e.g., dizziness, falls, confusion, mood or personality changes, insomnia, urinary retention, lethargy, loss of appetite, ...)?
		At least yearly, have you reviewed with your doctor whether you should be still taking this medication (Is it still needed? At what dose? Is it the safest? Is it the most effective?)

Make a point to talk to your physician or pharmacist about medications in the “not sure” column. Problems due to drug interactions or medication errors result in many hospital admissions and can make simple health problems complex in older patients.

⇒ KNOW YOUR MEDICATIONS! ⇐

Learn what questions to ask. Expect answers. It's your life and your health.

Talking with Your Doctor and Pharmacist

I. Keep a written MEDICATIONS CHART and SPECIAL NOTE PAD.

Medications Chart- Use a chart like the one on the back. Keep it updated. Take it with you to all medical appointments. This is especially important if you go to more than one doctor.

Special Note Pad- Three crucial reasons for you to keep one:
“So you can tell; so you can ask; so you can write.”

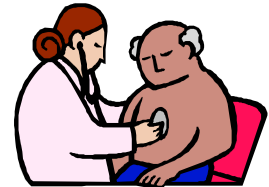


1. In between appointments, when you notice symptoms or changes that might be an effect of a medication, write them down *so you can tell* your physician about them.
2. As questions occur to you between visits about your medications or other aspects of your health, write them down in your notepad, *so you can ask* them at your next visit
3. The special note pad will only be a help if you remember to take it with you to your appointment. Keep it and your medications chart together. As the doctor gives you instructions and prescribes medications, the note pad will be there *so you can write* down what he/she tells you and refer to it when double-checking the label at the pharmacy and when updating your medications chart.

II. Questions You May Want to Ask Your Physician/Pharmacist:

(adapted from the FDA and National Council on Patient Information and Education):

- What is the medicine for and what effects should I expect?
Does this drug replace any other medicine I have been using?
- What other drug or non-drug therapies could be used to treat this condition? How do the risks and benefits compare?
- How and when will I use it, what amount will I use and for how long? What should I do if I miss a dose?
- What are the brand and generic names of the medicine? Is a generic form available?
- Should I avoid any other medicines (prescription or over-the-counter), dietary supplements, drinks, foods or activities while using this drug?
- When should I expect the medicine to begin working ; how will I know it is working?
- Will this drug interact with my other medications and therapies?
- What are the possible side effects?



III. Relating to your PHARMACIST

Your pharmacist maintains a medications record on you. It is most effective if you show him/her your completed medications chart.

Over-the-counter drugs, herbals, mail order prescriptions, etc. can then be noted on your record. The pharmacist can then provide a second pair of eyes guarding against medication errors including duplication (taking two forms of the same medicine), additive effects (of similar medications), drug-drug interactions, and drugs that are contraindicated with certain foods and diseases. Unfortunately, errors can also happen at the pharmacy. You can catch them if you read the label carefully and ask questions if what you have been given is different than what you understood was prescribed. Again, your written notes in your note pad can help.



Avoiding Medication Errors in the Home

Despite the best relationship and communication with our physicians and pharmacists, serious health consequences can result because of mistakes we make at home.



Quiz # 2:

(If you answer “yes” to any of the following, try to come up with a system that will work for you—one that minimizes the chances that medication errors cause you harm.)

Yes	No	Mistakes People Sometimes Make
		Do I sometimes find myself saying, after an interruption, “Now have I taken that pill?”
		Do I have a system so that I will know if I have forgotten to take my medication (such as pill boxes)?
		Do I sometimes fail to follow instructions on <i>when</i> to take my medications?
		Do I sometimes fail to follow instructions on <i>how</i> to take my medications (for example, with or without food)?
		Do I sometimes neglect to read the directions on the label for safe use of over-the-counter medications, herbals, and nutritional supplements that I take?
		Do I store my medicines in direct sunlight or where it sometimes gets very hot?
		Do I store my medicines where it is too humid (e.g., bathroom)?
		Do I neglect to update my list of medications every time there is a change in my medications, dosage, or when it is to be taken?
		Do I ever take medicine in the dark?
		Have I chosen not to take medication, or take less than prescribed, because of the cost of the medication?
		Am I reluctant to talk to my physician/pharmacist about reasons I may have for not taking medicine as prescribed? (including difficulty remembering, swallowing, or handling medications...or concerns about cost, effectiveness..)

What if I Can’t Afford to Take the Medication?

For those 65 and older, EPIC is the New York State senior prescription plan offering substantial savings to those whose annual income is under \$35,000 (\$50,000/couple). There are also new discount cards being offered by some drug manufacturers to those on Medicare who have no prescription plan. Fortunately, for New Yorkers, the EPIC plan often offers greater savings to those taking several different prescription medicines. Call the Tompkins County Office for the Aging for more information (274-5492).

For low income persons under 65, many drug manufacturers offer free medications through their “Patient Assistance Programs.” Each manufacturer has its own eligibility criteria (e.g., annual income under \$12,000-\$18,000). However, first alert your physician to the difficulty you are having affording medications. A less expensive generic drug may be available. Your doctor also may be able to work something out or assist you in applying for one or more patient assistance programs. For online information on patient assistance programs, visit: <http://www.rxassist.org>.

