

Tips for Safer Medication Use

In 2007, Canadians filled 448 million prescriptions costing over \$20 billion. While the average person fills 13 prescriptions a year, people in their 60's and 70's fill about 35. Drugs play an important role in health care and can save, improve and extend lives. But they can also cause serious problems if they aren't used properly. Each year, Health Canada receives thousands of reports of adverse drug reactions, many of which are preventable. Here are some useful tips to help you and your family use prescription and over-the-counter medications more safely.

Asking Questions

- When you receive a new prescription from your doctor, find out the name of the drug, why it was prescribed, along with when and how it should be taken.
- One of the best ways to avoid mistakes is to learn as much as you can about your medicines. If you are unsure you are using your medication correctly, or are unclear about its effects or purpose, ask your pharmacist or doctor. Don't hesitate to ask questions or express your concerns.
- If you take multiple medications, ask the pharmacist to make a schedule for when and in what order to take them.
- If your dosage schedule is changed, make sure you or your doctor informs the pharmacist.
- Keep a written record of all medications you are taking, including vitamins, non-prescription and herbal products. Some of these interact with each other, which can change the way they work in your body.
- Bring the list with you whenever you go to see your doctor or pharmacist, since they will only be aware of the medications they themselves prescribed or dispensed.
- Use only one pharmacy.
- If you have ever had a bad reaction or an allergy to a drug, or there are changes to your medical condition, tell your doctor and pharmacist and make certain this information is in your file.
- Ask the pharmacist if you notice unexplained changes in size, color, markings or dose of your medication.
- It may be useful to have a list of questions prepared before you meet with your health care professional.
- If it will help, write the answers down.
- Read the patient information brochure that usually comes with your prescription.



Here are some questions to ask your pharmacist when starting a prescription:

- Why am I taking this medicine?
- Can this medicine be used safely with the other medicines and treatments I already use?
- When should I take it, in what amount, for how long?
- Do I take it on an empty stomach or with food?
- Are there any special directions for using this medication?
- How will I know if this medicine is working?
- Will I need any tests (e.g. blood tests, x-rays) to make sure the medication is working as it is supposed to?
- What side effects could I experience?
- What should I do if I miss a dose?
- What should I do if I use too much by mistake?
- Should I avoid any drinks, foods, other substances or activities while using this medicine?
- Can I drink alcohol while taking this?
- Will this medicine make me drowsy?
- If I am pregnant or breastfeeding, can I take this medicine?
- Does the medication need to be refrigerated?
- Can I get my medicine in a container that is easier to open?
- Is there another form of this medication that would be easier to swallow?
- Is there any chance that I could become dependent or addicted to this medicine? What can I do to avoid this?

Taking your Medication... At Home

- Read the label every time you are about to use a medication – make sure it's the right one, for the right person, taken in the right way, at the right time.
- Take your medicine at regularly scheduled times each day. You can do this by associating your medication with a regular activity, such as walking or a meal (if it can be taken with food).
- Take the recommended dose exactly as prescribed even if you are tempted to use more to feel better faster.
- If you forget to take your medication, don't double the next dose – call your doctor or pharmacist for advice.



- Don't share your medication and don't take other people's drugs.
- If there is more than one person in the family, on each container highlight the name of the user and the dosing instructions with a marker; use a different color highlighter for each member of the family.
- In general, all medications should be taken with a full glass of water unless your doctor or pharmacist recommends otherwise. If your medication needs to be taken with "plenty of water", you may need to drink more than a full glass.
- If your medication needs to be taken on an empty stomach, take it one hour before meals or two hours after food with a full glass of liquid, usually water.
- If your medication can be taken with food, a piece of bread, a cracker or banana can help to quicken its passage into the stomach.
- Gravity can help the medication reach your stomach – stand or sit upright for at least five to ten minutes after taking it.
- Some medications that should not be taken with food should also not be taken with milk and other dairy products.
- If you are starting a new medication that may cause drowsiness, it is important to avoid activities that require alertness (e.g. driving) until you find out how the drug will affect you.
- Alcohol can add to the effects of a medication, making you drowsy.
- Never take or give a medication in the dark – many pills look and feel alike.
- Check the colour and consistency of liquid for solid particles or sediment in the bottle or unusual odors, which can mean drug spoilage. (Some medications contain sediment and must be well shaken.)
- Finish all the medicine as directed – even if you start to feel better. Don't save any for future use unless your doctor tells you to.

Side Effects

Most drugs can cause some side effects. While these are usually mild and short-term, in rare cases they can be serious. Your pharmacist and doctor can help you understand any potential side effects and how long they might last.

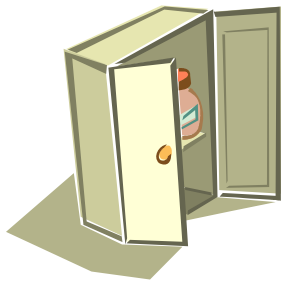


- Know what to expect from your medication – how soon you can expect to see results and what side effects you might experience.
- If you experience unexplained symptoms, contact your doctor or pharmacist. Your doctor may want to change your medication or its dose if side effects are too bothersome.

- Older people can be more likely to experience some side effects or find them more troublesome. (As you age, liver and kidney functions decline which affects the way a drug is broken down and removed from the body.)
- Examples of side effects that may especially affect older people are dizziness, dry mouth, drowsiness, falls, depression, insomnia, nausea and diarrhea.
- Some side effects (adverse reactions) are more serious than others but are fairly rare. Examples include: a severe allergic reaction with difficulty breathing; skin rash, itching or swelling; feeling faint and having a racing heart; severe nausea or diarrhea; severe depression.
- If you think you are having an adverse drug reaction, contact your doctor or pharmacist immediately.

Storing and Disposing of your Medications

- Keep your medication in the original container with the cap closed.
- Keep medications in a dry, cool place out of sunlight. (The heat and moisture of a bathroom could damage them.) Remember to put medicines out of sight and reach of children and pets.



- Don't store medicine with food or household products. Refrigerate only if it says so on the label.
- Check expiration dates. Don't use prescription or over-the-counter drugs, vitamins or herbal remedies past their expiration date.
- Clear out your medicine cabinet at least once a year.

Dispose of medicines that are old, no longer in their original containers, with illegible labels, that have changed colour, smell or taste.

- Don't throw medicine in the garbage — children or animals may get into it. Don't flush medicine down the toilet — it's not good for the environment.
- Gather all unused and expired drugs, vitamins and herbal remedies and bring them to your local pharmacy for disposal.

Talk to your Pharmacist ...about

With four years of university education on drugs and their safe use, pharmacists are the drug experts on your health care team

- Help with managing your “wellness” by supporting lifestyle changes (for example, quitting smoking), as well as with getting information you need about your or your family's health.
- How to manage your diabetes, asthma, high blood pressure, high cholesterol or other conditions.

- Managing headaches and other minor aches and pains, ulcers, heartburn, stomach upset.
- Reviewing all your medication records and overall health to ensure you are getting the most from the medications you take.
- Advice and information about nonprescription medications, vitamins and natural health products.
- Helping you make sense of health information from the Internet or in the news.
- Additional help with your prescriptions such as bigger print on the label or help to organize your daily regimen.
- If you have a problem opening your medication, ask for a different type of container.
- If you have a problem swallowing your medication, ask for suggestions.
- If you have a problem remembering to take your medication, ask for some ideas to help you keep track such as pill boxes or calendars.



Going to the Hospital

- Ask your pharmacist for a list of all your prescription medications including the exact dose and timing. Add to the list any non-prescription drugs, herbal and natural health products, and vitamins.
- Bring the list to the hospital with you and give it to the admissions staff to place in your chart.
- Ask whether you are to continue taking medications you were taking before your admission to hospital.
- Once you are ready to be discharged, ask to speak to the hospital pharmacist about any changes to your medication regimen. Ask if you will be continuing any medications started in the hospital and make sure you understand the instructions.
- Contact your doctor and pharmacist to tell them about any new medication you are taking following the hospital stay.

Products to Keep on Hand

- Pain and fever relief (acetaminophen or ibuprofen)
- Cough suppressants
- Decongestants
- Anti-diarrhea medication
- Rash and itch medication
- Antihistamines for allergic reactions

- First aid supplies (e.g., bandages, cotton swabs, thermometer, antiseptic for cleaning cuts and scrapes, antibiotic ointment, rubbing alcohol)
- Sunscreen (15 SPF or higher)

Medication Tips for Seniors

- Read medicine labels and package inserts, and follow the directions. Find out if medication should be taken on an empty stomach or with food. Know what to do if you miss a dose of your medication. If you have questions, ask your doctor or pharmacist.
- Place the medication in a highly visible area so it's readily available at the time you should take it (if there are no children or pets in the household or no special storage instructions).
- Incorporate the medication into your daily routine. For example, take it immediately before or after another daily activity, such as eating breakfast, doing a household chore or going to bed.
- Ask your pharmacist about medication reminder devices such as calendars, mini-alarms or blister packages (plastic, sealed bubbles).



- For more complicated regimens, pill boxes with various compartments (for meals, days or weeks) can help. Pill boxes are also useful for people who have trouble opening pill bottles.
- You can ask for pre-filled pill boxes or request bottles without child-proof caps. Some medication aids are available with Braille or raised characters.

- Once a year, do a 'brown bag checkup' to help avoid medication mistakes and cut down on unnecessary medications. Put all of your medications and over-the-counter products in a bag and take them into your doctor or pharmacist. The bag should include any over-the-counter or prescription drugs, herbs, vitamins, dietary supplements, and topical treatments such as ointments and creams.
- Take along a friend or relative to your doctor's appointments if you think you might need help to understand or to remember what the doctor tells you. Write down the information your doctor gives you about your medicines or your health condition.
- Keep track of side effects or possible drug interactions and let your doctor or pharmacist know right away about any unexpected symptoms or changes in the way you feel.

Medication Tips for Children

- Ask your pharmacist for instructions on how medication should be taken. Read the label and follow instructions carefully. Find out if it should be given with food or water.

- Know your child's weight since many drugs are dosed by weight.
- Make sure the doctor and pharmacist are aware of your child's allergies or other health problems.
- Make sure the doctor and pharmacist know about all the prescription and non-prescription drugs, vitamins and herbal products your child is taking.
- Teach your child that they should only take medicine that is given by you or another adult that they know well.
- Make sure your child never takes someone else's medication.
- Never pretend medicine is candy.
- Do not give ASA (Aspirin) to children, unless prescribed by your doctor.



Prepared by Canadian Pharmacists Association www.pharmacists.ca