

Using and storing your medications safely

By Teddi Nicolaus

If you're like most people, there's probably a prescription bottle in the cabinet with your name on it. Each month, many Americans take at least one prescription drug.

When used as directed, medicines can help us live longer and healthier lives. But sometimes people take medicines the wrong way. And more than 1.5 million people in the U.S. visit emergency departments each year because of medication-related allergic reactions and other side effects.

The older we get, the more medications we're likely to use, which puts us at additional risk for negative side effects, says Jessica Merrey, PharmD, MBA, lead clinical pharmacy specialist at Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore.

"Safety starts with knowing why your health care provider prescribed a medication for you," Merrey says. "If you don't know why, then don't be afraid to ask your doctor or the pharmacist who is filling it."

Keeping track of your medications will help keep you and your family healthy and safe, Merrey says. That means using them as directed, storing them properly and learning about the possibility of side effects and interactions. And don't forget to always read the label before taking a drug.

There are risks in taking any prescription

medicine, vitamin or other over-the-counter supplement. While medicines are intended to improve the quality of our lives, they can also cause unpleasant side effects. Drowsiness, dry mouth and stomach pain are some of the common side effects that can occur.

If you are having trouble with the side effects of a drug, tell your health care provider.

Another thing to watch out for is drug interactions. Sometimes the drugs or supplements you take don't "play nice" together when they are in your body. For example, vitamin E can increase your risk of

bleeding, which can be dangerous if you're using a blood thinner. If you're taking a high blood pressure drug, you could have a reaction if you take a nasal decongestant.

You should always be honest with your health care provider about all the drugs you're taking, including the ones you buy without a prescription. That includes vitamins, pain relievers, digestive aids, allergy meds and herbal supplements, such as herbal teas and tinctures.

It's a good idea to keep a list of medications you take in your wallet, purse or under the emergency medical tab on your phone. That way it can easily be accessed if you're involved in a health situation in which you're unable to communicate, such as after a car crash.

Keep medicines organized

Perhaps you use drugs to control blood pressure, lower cholesterol, reduce anxiety, or treat Type 2 diabetes. If you take a lot of different drugs, you might forget to take one, take a double dose by mistake, or take it at the wrong time. Whatever your situation, a pill organizer can be a game-changer.

Pill organizers are widely available at drug stores and online and are available in a variety of formats. You can even buy "smart" pill dispensers that stay locked until it's time for the next dose.

There are plenty of other options to help you remember to take your medications, such as crossing days off on a calendar, setting an alarm or using a reminder app on your phone.



>> For more information, visit www.cdc.gov/medication-safety

Store them safely

Reaping the full benefits of your medications relies on many factors, including proper storage.

Does your bathroom have a mirrored cabinet on the wall by the sink? Many of us call it "the medicine cabinet," but it's not the best place for storing medicines, especially if there are children in the home.

"Think 'up high and dry,' such as in a high, locked kitchen cabinet away from light and moisture, with childproof safety caps tightened and secured," Merrey says.

Exposure to sunlight, fluorescent lighting, heat and humidity can damage medications and reduce their effectiveness. Always check the label and package insert for storage instructions.

Disposing of any unused or expired prescription medicines as soon as you're done with them can reduce the risk of others misusing the medication, either on purpose or by mistake.

It's important to dispose of drugs the right way, though. Never flush medicines down the toilet, because they can end up in the water supply.

Communities across the nation provide drug take-back programs and disposal boxes are available at many hospitals and drug stores.

Check with your pharmacist, your local health department, police or fire department for a disposal program or site near you.



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