

Medication Management and Safety:

A GUIDEBOOK FOR OLDER ADULTS

Prepared by Mountain-Pacific
Quality Health in collaboration with
Billings Care Transitions Coalition



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INTRODUCTION

People are increasingly afflicted with chronic diseases as they age.

Older adults are encouraged to **establish a relationship with a primary care physician** and have an annual wellness examination to help diagnose health issues before they advance and become life-threatening.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), 80 percent of older Americans have at least one chronic condition. Data from the National Council on Aging indicates the majority of older adults have at least two chronic conditions.

Chronic conditions often involve complex treatments, which may mean juggling a handful of different medications.

Education empowers you.

Always check with your doctor or pharmacist before you take any new medicine or make changes to the medications you are currently taking.

Be sure to ask your health care provider how the information in this guidebook can apply to your individual health.

SECTION 1

ATTITUDE AND TEAMWORK ARE
THE KEYS TO SUCCESS



Ready, willing and able

As you grow older, your body will change.

You may exhibit increased sensitivities to medications.

The liver and kidneys may not work as well as they did just a few years ago. This means their systems cannot break down, absorb and remove medications as efficiently. As a result, a medication may stay in your body longer and cause dangerous side effects if the dose is not adjusted.

While you may have enjoyed a lifetime of good health, one or more chronic conditions (examples: arthritis; lung disease; heart disease; diabetes; cancer) may have been recently diagnosed.

Some individuals also experience a gradual decline in cognitive skills, and the ability to think and remember is slowed and impaired.



Therefore, as we age, develop a collaborative team to ensure and when to take prescriptions as intended by the prescriber.

Potential team members include:

Family members

Caregivers

Support group

Friends

Neighbors

Physician(s)

Pharmacist

No one wants the improper use of a medication to result in a complication that involves a trip to the emergency room or a hospital stay.

To achieve the therapeutic goal(s) of each medication, you must be willing and able to take medications as your health care professional(s) direct.

SECTION 2

MEDICATION ROUTINE



You only live once, but if you do it right, once is enough.

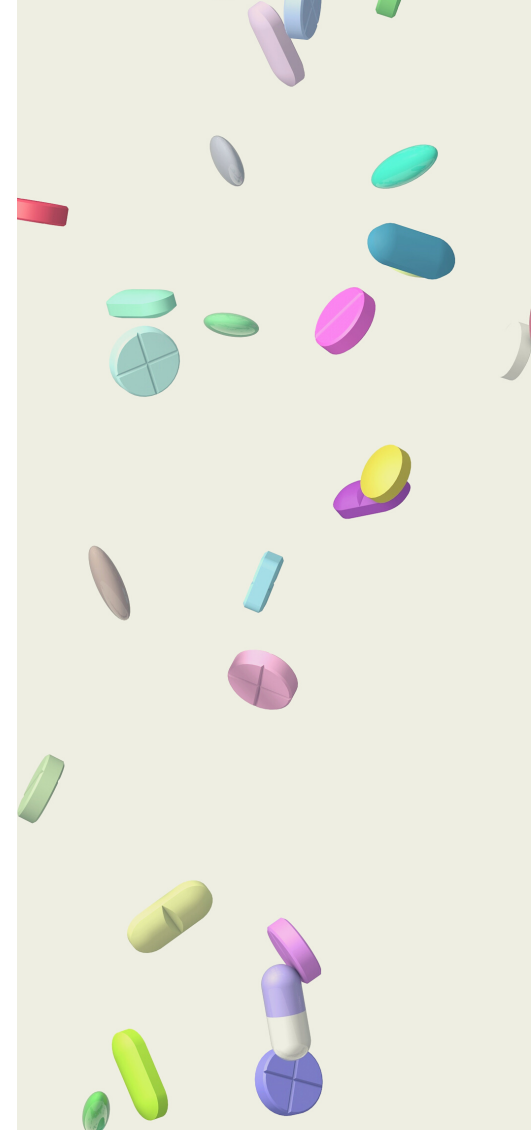
Most older adults enjoy the pleasure of living at home with family members and loved ones. Others live at home alone but may have family or a caregiver residing nearby or have arranged for routine home care services.

Regardless of your living circumstances, you should **develop a medication management routine**, preferably with the assistance of someone you know and trust to help you.

Even healthy older adults can forget to take medication or mix up a dose. Those with even mild cognitive decline need someone to ask, “Have you taken your medication(s) [this morning or this evening]?” Those with more advanced cognitive disorders should have someone they trust (and preferably someone with medication management training) take on the daily responsibility of managing medication(s).

Whether you live alone or in a long-term care facility but manage your own medication, you should **develop a routine**. Take a medication prescribed at mealtime just before you take your first bite. Take bedtime medication just before (or after) brushing your teeth.

Older adults, who live in a setting where someone manages their medication, must trust and follow the instructions of that person.



SECTION 3

KEEPING TRACK OF MEDICATIONS



One? Two? Or More?

Some older adults enjoy not having to take medications. Many take one, while others take many medications each day.

If you take two or more medications, there is a chance some of your medications may interact with one another in harmful ways. The chances of this happening increase with the number of medications you take. A side effect of medications may even be mistaken for a new medical condition. At times, the side effect is treated with another medication, making the problem even worse.

Make a list.

Make a list of ALL of your medicines, including prescription medications and over-the-counter (OTC) medicines, for example, aspirin, antacids, vitamins, inhalers and herbal products (ginseng and ginkgo).

You should **keep a copy of the list** in your purse or wallet and give a copy to your physician(s), family members, friend, caregiver or home care provider.

Then, ask your health care provider to review the list of *all* of your medicines with you. Ideally, you should **routinely gather all of your prescription medications and over-the-counter (OTC) medicines** and take them along to a doctor's appointment.

Make sure you share any allergies with your health care provider.

Before you start taking a new medicine, ask your health care provider if one of your current medicines could create a problem the new medicine is meant to treat.

If you are feeling better or believe a prescribed medication is not working, you should never stop taking a medication without checking with your health care provider(s) first.

If the time comes when you must seek additional care (for example: transitioning from home to assisted living), share a current medication list with your new health care provider or caregiver.

Finally, if you consume alcohol, double-check your prescription(s) to prevent an adverse interaction.

Current Medications List				
Name: _____		Emergency Contact Name/Phone: _____		
Date last updated: _____				
Prescription Medications:				
Name of Medication	Strength and Frequency	Condition Medication Taken For	Physician Who Prescribed Medication	Notes

Allergies	Pharmacy/Prescription Drug Use

Whose pills are these anyway?

Medications should be kept in a safe place and out of the reach of children.

Medications should **never be shared with others**, and no one should ever take medications prescribed to someone else.

Traveling? Do not forget your meds.

Most medications must be taken on a schedule to avoid illness, injury or worse. They should be kept close by in a secure place and not packed in checked luggage.

If you should forget your medication, call your health care professional as soon as possible and arrange for a temporary prescription to be sent to a pharmacy near you.

SECTION 4

ORGANIZING MEDICATIONS



One-stop shopping is best.

Prescription medications should be filled at one pharmacy. This allows a pharmacist to monitor your medications and easily check for drug interactions.

If you do not have a way to pick up your medication(s), ask if the pharmacy will deliver or mail or arrange to have a family member or friend pick it up for you.

Ask for help if you are unable to open the container or ask your pharmacist for easy-open bottle tops the next time the prescription is filled.

Pharmacies may also be able to **print larger labels**, which are easier to read.

Remember: once you leave the pharmacy, the prescription medication not be returned.

Pull your meds together.

If you take one medication more than once a day or take many medications throughout the day, consider buying a **pillbox**.

A pillbox helps keep track of the dose and frequency (how often they take it) of medications taken each day.

When organizing a pillbox, special care needs to be given to the actual name and dose (mg) of the medication versus relying on its shape and color.

Consider keeping the empty medication containers in case questions come up about the dosage and frequency.

If you manage your own medication, develop and maintain a routine to fill the pillbox once a week. If possible, a trusted person should check to ensure each medication is properly organized.

Can my medication be pre-packaged for me?

If you are uncomfortable sorting out the details of a pillbox, check with your pharmacy about having medication provided in **bubble packing**.

There are also alternative medication packaging programs available.

Some are referred to as "strip packaging," while others are known by the name of the vendor offering the service.



Refill prescriptions before your medication supply is exhausted. You or your caregiver need to think ahead (at least six or seven days) and allow for time to order and have the prescription ready for use.

You should also consider talking to your pharmacist about the following:

Automatic prescription refills

Timing refills of different medications to occur on the same date (This also helps decrease the number of trips to the pharmacy.)

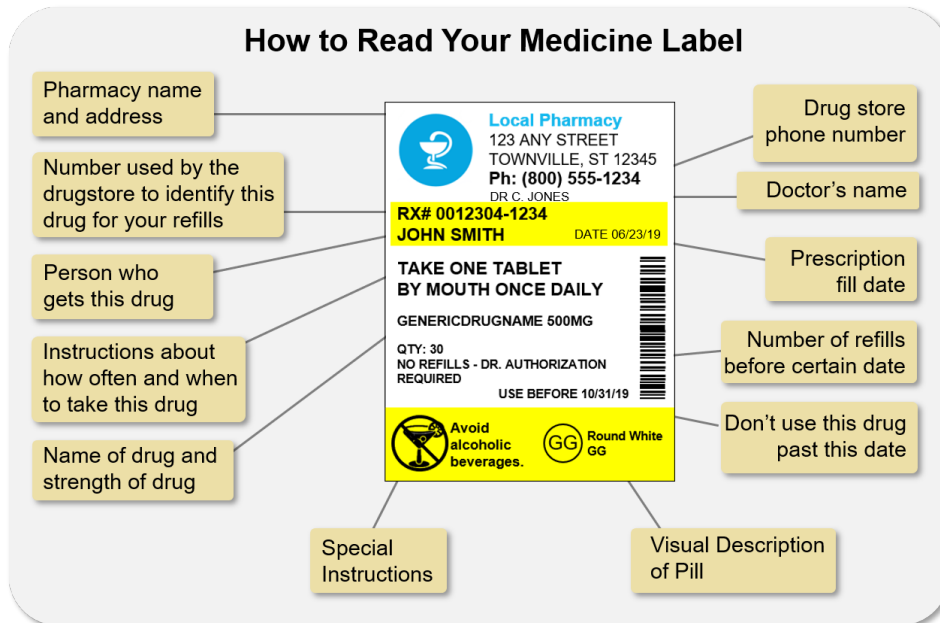
SECTION 5

UNDERSTANDING PRESCRIPTIONS



Say what?

Before opening a medication container, take a few minutes and read the pharmacy label.



Reading Medication Labels

As you review your new prescription, **read the label carefully** for information about dosage, timing, interactions and other important medication management details.

Typically, a prescription label has **nine parts** and types of information. While the prescription labels may look somewhat different, they will have similar content.

1. Pharmacy Information

Name, address, phone number and other details about the pharmacy that filled the prescription

2. Your Information

Name and address of the person for whom the drug is prescribed

3. Prescribing Doctor's Information

Physician or health care provider's name and contact information

4. Drug Name and Strength

Medicine's brand, chemical or generic name along with the strength of one unit of the prescription in a measurement, such as milligrams (mg) or milliliters (mL)

5. Instructions

Instructions might read "Take one tablet twice daily, morning and night, by mouth" and explain how and when to take the medication. **Always read the instructions** section carefully for any new medication. Refer any questions to your health care provider or pharmacist.

6. Prescription Information

Date the medication was prescribed, date the medication was filled by a pharmacist, number of pills or doses provided, how many times the prescription may be refilled, when the medication expires and the telephone number for the pharmacy assigned to your prescription

7. Pharmaceutical Manufacture Information

Name of the company that manufactured the medication and a physical description of the drug, or if the medication is a generic version of a brand-name drug, the name of the branded counterpart may also be listed

8. Federal Caution Statement

Prescription warnings such as "Caution: Federal law prohibits the transfer of this drug to any person other than the patient for whom prescribed"

9. Other Important Information

Common side effects or activities to avoid while taking the medication

Heed that warning.

An OTC medication, or medicine that may be purchased without a prescription, has a different label and includes a drug facts label.

Here is an **example of an OTC medication label** that includes U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) regulations:

Drug Facts	
Active ingredient (in each tablet) Chlorpheniramine maleate 2 mg.....	Purpose Antihistamine
Uses temporarily relieves these symptoms due to hay fever or other upper respiratory allergies: ■ sneezing ■ runny nose ■ itchy, watery eyes ■ itchy throat	
Warnings Ask a doctor before use if you have ■ glaucoma ■ a breathing problem such as emphysema or chronic bronchitis ■ trouble urinating due to an enlarged prostate gland Ask a doctor or pharmacist before use if you are taking tranquilizers or sedatives When using this product ■ drowsiness may occur ■ avoid alcoholic drinks ■ alcohol, sedatives, and tranquilizers may increase drowsiness ■ be careful when driving a motor vehicle or operating machinery ■ excitability may occur, especially in children If pregnant or breast-feeding, ask a health professional before use. Keep out of reach of children. In case of overdose, get medical help or contact a Poison Control Center right away.	
Directions	
adults and children 12 years and over	take 2 tablets every 4 to 6 hours; not more than 12 tablets in 24 hours
children 6 years to under 12 years	take 1 tablet every 4 to 6 hours; not more than 6 tablets in 24 hours
children under 6 years	ask a doctor

Drug Facts (continued)	
Other information ■ store at 20-25° C (68-77° F) ■ protect from excessive moisture	
Inactive ingredients D&C yellow no. 10, lactose, magnesium stearate, microcrystalline cellulose, pregelatinized starch	

SECTION 6

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS



1. What if I miss taking my medication as prescribed? Should I “double-up?”

This is an important question for a variety of medications, as a patient may become ill from skipping a dose or accidentally taking two doses in one day. Asking in advance means you will know how to respond if a mistake occurs. If you miss taking your medication, contact your health care provider as soon as possible.

Never change how you take medication from the instructions of a prescription without first consulting with your health care provider or pharmacist.

2. I tend to forget the details about my medications given to me by the doctor in the examination room or over the phone. Who should I contact if I have questions?

Always refer questions to the health care provider that prescribed the medication or the pharmacy that filled the prescription.

3. I can barely afford my medication(s). If the costs continue to rise, I may have to choose between food and my medications. What should I do?

This is a major problem for many Americans. There are programs to help older adults pay for their medications. Check to see if your state has a **State Pharmaceutical Assistance Programs (SPAPs)**, a state-run program that assists low-income older adults with disabilities who meet eligibility requirements in paying for their prescription medications.

Before selecting a financial assistance program, consult a family member or trusted individual. Always proceed with caution and exercise great care.

Finally, ask your health care provider and pharmacist about alternative medications. There is usually more than one alternative therapeutic medication available, often at a lower cost.

4. I received a new prescription. How do I know if it takes the place of any medication already being taken?

Check with your health care provider or your pharmacist.

5. How do I know if I am taking any duplicate or unneeded medications?

Check with your health care provider or your pharmacist.

6. If I experience a side effect from my medication, should I stop taking it?

Check with your health care provider or your pharmacist before you stop taking any medication(s).

7. I am about to move into an assisted living facility (or nursing home). How will my medication regimen and costs change?

Most assisted living facilities and nursing homes work with a **preferred pharmacy** to provide medications for their residents. These pharmacies often have a list of medications they have on hand and are available at a lower cost.

Because of this, some of your medications or inhalers might change to a very similar medicine with a different name. If you have any questions about your medications or insurance coverage while living in a facility, be sure to talk to your health care provider and the facility staff.

8. I live in a nursing home where a pharmacist retained by the facility performs what is called a drug regimen review (DDR) every month. What is a DDR?

A DDR takes a general look at a resident's medication list. This should not be confused with a comprehensive medication management review. Long-term care facility pharmacists are required to review each resident's medications each month. They look for any problems or medication changes that may have taken place in the previous month.

9. How do I know when the medication will start working? How do I know if there is anything I should watch for, like side effects or allergic reactions?

Check with your health care provider or your pharmacist.

10. I have trouble swallowing. May I crush or break my medication prior to taking it?

Check with your health care provider or your pharmacist.

11. Will my medication make me more prone to losing my balance and falling?

It depends. Some medications may have an effect on balance. Check with your health care provider or your pharmacist.

12. My prescription calls for one-half of a tablet. I have arthritis and cannot break the tablets. What should I do?

If a prescription dose is a one-half tablet, have a caregiver split the tablets for you. If you have a pill cutter, ask for assistance in cutting the tablet(s).

The next time the prescription is filled, ask if the pharmacy can prescribe the medication in the **exact dosage** so splitting is not required. You can also ask if they will split the tablets for you.

13. How do I dispose of unused medications that are past their prescription date?

Ask your health care professional if he or she provides **medication deactivation bags** that can be used easily at home.

Also, check with your local law enforcement agency to see if your community has a "take back" site. The federal Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) operates an annual take-back program. If none of these options is available in your area, some medications may be safely flushed or sent to a landfill.



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