

Using Medicines Safely



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This handout is based on a chapter from *Eldercare at Home*, a publication of The AGS Foundation for Health in Aging (FHA). Visit www.healthinaging.org for more information on the workbook and presentation kits, as well as access the full text of *Eldercare at Home* (without illustrations).

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There are five parts to this Booklet

Understanding the problem

Defines the problem, who is likely to have it, and what kinds of things can be done to deal with it.

When to call for professional help

Explains when to call for help immediately or during office hours as well as lists of information you should have before you call.

What you can do to help

What you can do to help with the problem and to prevent it.

Carrying out your plan

How to deal with problems in carrying out your plan, how to check on progress, and what to do if your plan isn't working.

Booklet summary

Summarizes what you can do to manage this problem. You can use this section to get a quick overview of what you can do.

Each action you can take is in bold and has a picture illustrating the action.

Understanding the Problem



Paul is reading to learn about how he can use medicines safely when taking care of his aunt.

People age 65 and over buy more than 25 percent of all prescription medicines and 30 percent of all nonprescription (over-the-counter) medicines sold in this country. Older people are more likely than younger people to have long-term illnesses such as arthritis, diabetes, high blood pressure, and heart disease that require taking medicines on a regular basis. Because older people often have several different health problems, it is common for them to take several different medicines.

When compared to younger people, older individuals tend to be more sensitive to the effects of many drugs. For example, a drug such as Valium (diazepam) may stay in an 80-year-old body four times as long as it does in a 40-year-old body. The liver and the kidneys break down and remove most drugs from the body. As people age, these organs may not work as rapidly as they used to, and drugs may leave the body more slowly, sometimes causing side effects. So, when drugs are prescribed over the phone or by a physician who does not know the older person well, ask to be sure it is the proper dose for an older person.

The doctor and pharmacist should be informed about all medicines that the older person is taking including nonprescription medicines. These include

1. all prescription drugs from any doctor, including eye drops
2. nonprescription medicine including vitamins, minerals, antihistamines, sleeping pills, laxatives, cold medicine, and antacids
3. folk remedies or nontraditional products – such as herbs
4. “social” drugs (such as alcohol, tobacco, or caffeine)

The doctor needs this information because nonprescription medicines can interact with each other as well as with prescribed medicines in ways that could be harmful to the patient. They can also cause side effects that the doctor may have to treat. It

will be helpful to the doctor, in making diagnoses, to know all the medicines that the patient is taking.

Pharmacists are able to give you information about side effects of medicines and even how they can interact with each other. Ask the pharmacist for this information and ask any other questions you have about the medicines when you have prescriptions filled or refilled – it may prevent a serious problem.

Your goals are to:

- Follow the doctor's and pharmacist's instructions
- Know all medicines that are being taken and their side effects
- Know if the medicines are safe to use together (for more than one prescription)
- Ask for generic brands in order to minimize costs
- Look out for side effects and report them

When To Get Professional Help Immediately



Laura is calling the doctor's office right away – any time during the day or night.

A drug reaction can be an emergency. Following is a list of serious symptoms that could be caused by a drug reaction. These drug reactions often begin shortly after starting a new medicine or when the dosage (amount) of a drug is changed.

Call the doctor or nurse immediately if any of the following symptoms occur

Hallucinations (hearing or seeing things that are not there)



After taking medicine, John's father thinks he sees someone in the door. But John doesn't see anyone. So John calls the doctor right away.

Call the doctor or nurse immediately if any of the following symptoms occur

Palpitations or rapid heart beat



After taking medicine, Arethra's heart is beating very fast and hard. So she calls the doctor right away.

Great trouble waking up, especially when others try to wake the person



After Paula's mother takes medicine, Paula cannot wake her up. So she calls the doctor right way.

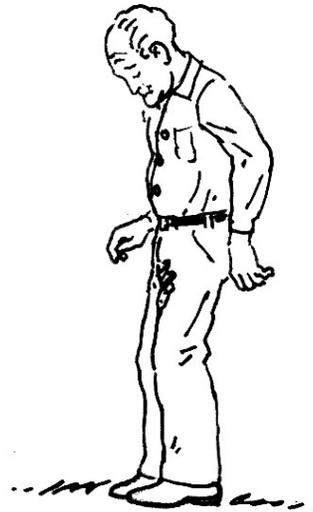
Call the doctor or nurse immediately if any of the following symptoms occur

Severe trembling, uncontrolled muscle movements, or convulsions (seizures)



After taking medicine, Wilma is shaking and she cannot stop. So she calls the doctor right away.

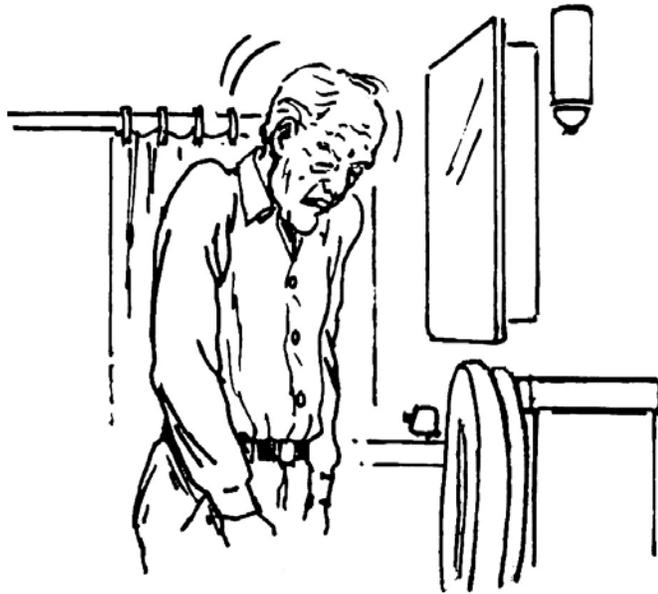
Unable to hold in urine or stool when this was not a problem in the past



After taking medicine, Andy has spots on his pants from urine. This did not happen in the past, so he calls the doctor right away. If Andy had stool in his pants after taking medicine, he would call the doctor right away.

Call the doctor or nurse immediately if any of the following symptoms occur

Unable to urinate despite feeling the need to urinate



After taking medicine, Glenn is trying to urinate, but he can't. So he calls the doctor right away.

Severe nausea or vomiting



After taking medicine, Sylvia's mother is throwing up very hard. So Sylvia calls the doctor right away.

Call the doctor or nurse immediately if any of the following symptoms occur

Dizziness, falling, trouble with balance



After taking medicine, Samantha feels dizzy and almost falls. So she calls the doctor right away.

Unusual bruising or bleeding from minor cuts



After taking medicine, Ruth has dark marks on her skin. This happens when she has only small bumps. So she calls the doctor right away.

Call the doctor or nurse immediately if any of the following symptoms occur

Blood in the stool



After taking medicine, Ted looks in the toilet and sees blood in the stool. So he calls the doctor right away.

Severe confusion



After taking medicine, Ruth's Uncle Anthony says things that don't make sense. So Ruth calls the doctor right away.

Call the doctor or nurse immediately if any of the following symptoms occur

Severe fatigue



After taking medicine, Emily feels very tired and it is hard for her to go upstairs or to do any work. So she calls the doctor right away.

Impaired or blurred vision, or seeing gold halos around objects



Fred is looking at Thelma sitting in the chair. She looks blurry and he sees a halo around her. This started when Fred took a new medicine, so Thelma will call the doctor right away.

Call the doctor or nurse immediately if any of the following symptoms occur

Hives, itching, skin rash, or swelling of the face



Olivia's arms itch and her face begins to swell after she starts a new medicine. So she calls the doctor right away.

If in addition to these symptoms, the person begins to have difficulty breathing or if there is swelling in the throat, take the person to an emergency room or call 911.

Difficulty breathing



After taking medicine, Bill has a hard time breathing. So his daughter Alice calls 911 right away to get help.

Call the doctor or nurse immediately if any of the following symptoms occur

Swelling in the throat



After taking medicine, Sam's aunt Sue felt her throat swell so she could hardly swallow, so Sam called 911 to get help right away.

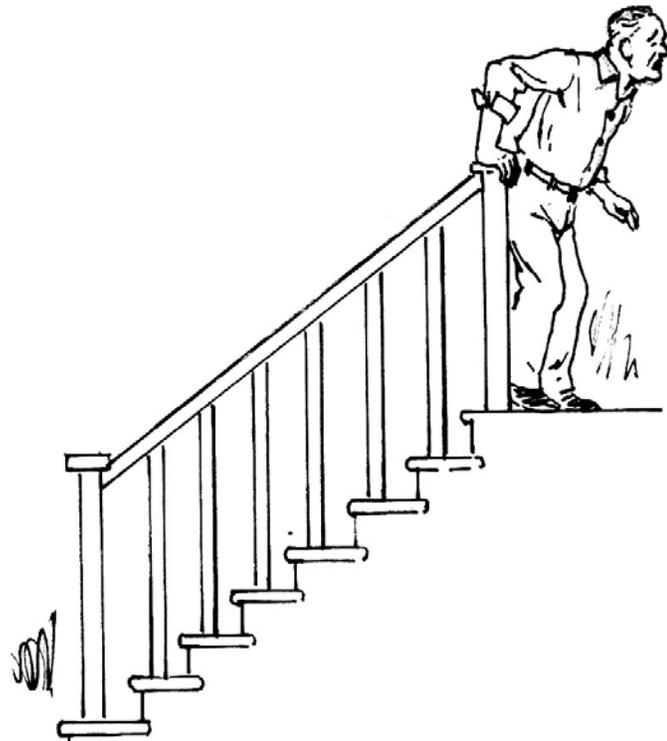
When symptoms are not an emergency but should be reported during office hours



Marcia is calling the doctor's office during the doctor's usual office hours.

While some side effects from medicines happen immediately, others happen slowly over a period of days or weeks, or even months. What may seem to be a new health problem or a worsening of an existing condition may be a reaction to a medicine. The following symptoms may develop over time as result of taking certain medicines and should be reported to the doctor:

Shortness of breath
(If sudden or severe, call the doctor immediately)



*After taking his medicine, Bill has a hard time breathing when he goes up stair or walks. So he calls the doctor during office hours. But if it is **very** hard for Bill to breathe, he will call the doctor right away.*

When symptoms are not an emergency but should be reported during office hours

Fatigue (If sudden or severe, call the doctor immediately)



After taking her medicine, Dinny's Aunt Mary won't do things she likes to do because she feels tired and wants to sleep. So Dinny calls the doctor during office hours. But if her Aunt Mary is very, very tired after taking medicine, Dinny will call the doctor right away.

Depression, feeling "down," or taking no interest in activities previously found enjoyable



After taking her medicine, Peter's Mother feels very sad. She doesn't want to do things that she liked to do in the past – like talking to friends or cooking. So Peter calls the doctor during office hours.

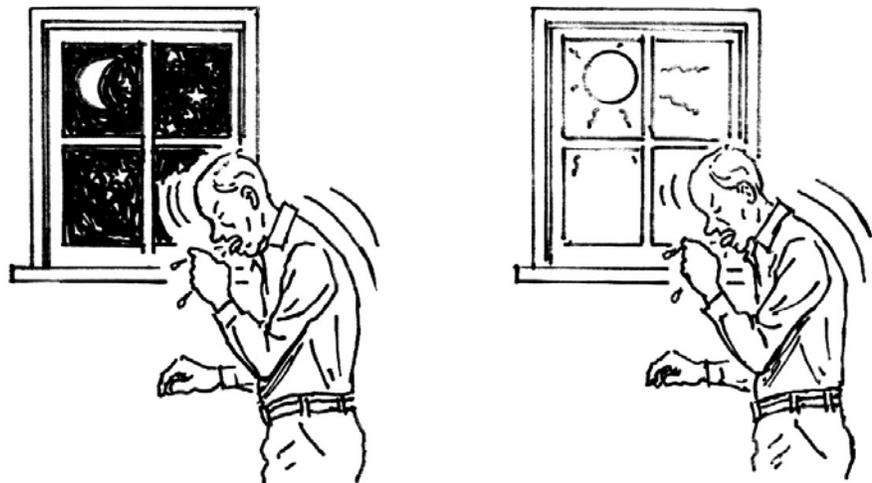
When symptoms are not an emergency but should be reported during office hours

Constipation



After taking her medicine, Sherry's aunt Martha is constipated for several days. So she calls the doctor during office hours.

Persistent cough



After taking his medicine, Art's grandfather coughs all day and all night. So he calls the doctor during office hours.

When symptoms are not an emergency but should be reported during office hours

Insomnia



After taking her medicine, Elisa's grandmother lies in bed at night, but she cannot go to sleep. So she calls the doctor during office hours.

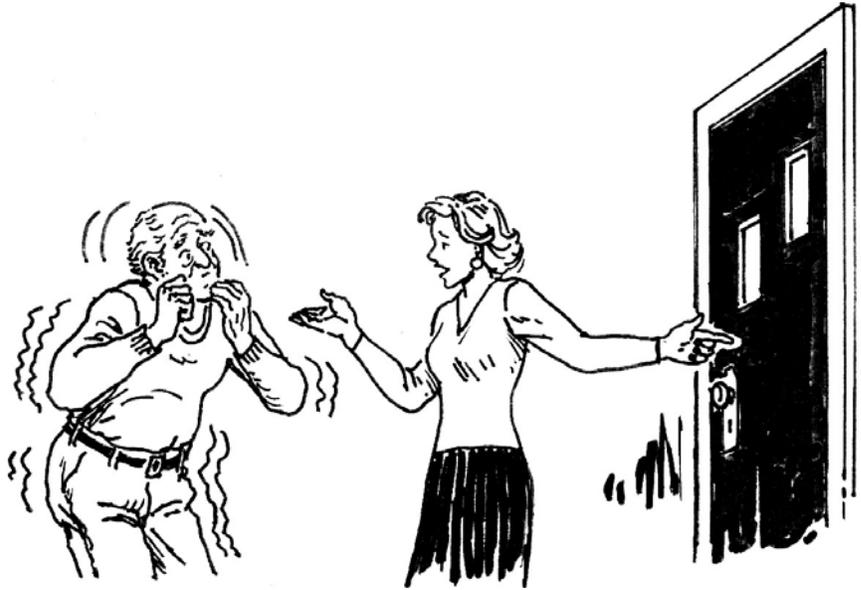
Sexual problems



Angela and Charles are unhappy because they haven't had sex together since Charles started his medicine. So they call the doctor during office hours.

When symptoms are not an emergency but should be reported during office hours

Feeling jittery or fearful



After starting a new medicine, Allison's Uncle John feels afraid when there is nothing to be afraid of. So Allison calls the doctor during office hours.

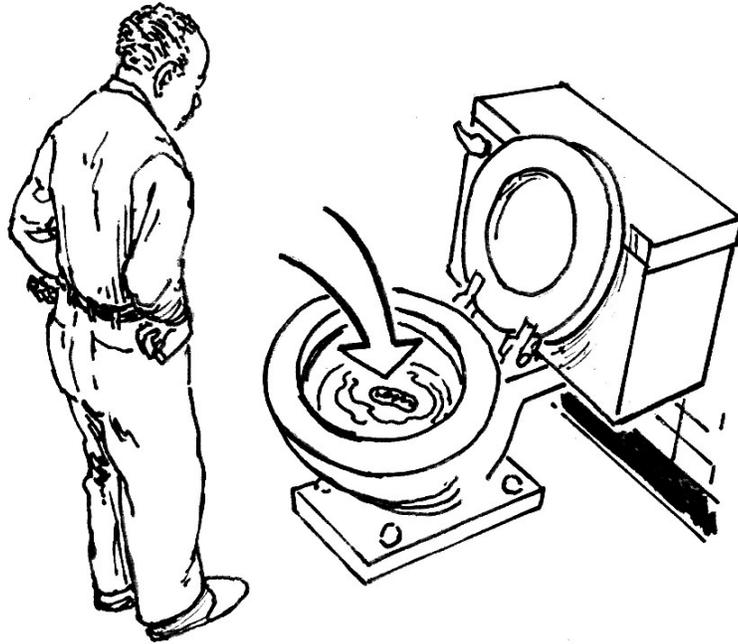
Sensitivity to sunlight



After taking her medicine, Mary's mother gets a sunburn whenever she goes in the sun for just a little while. So she calls the doctor during office hours.

When symptoms are not an emergency but should be reported during office hours

Black, tarry stool



After taking medicine, Jason looked in the toilet bowl after defecating and it was very black and looked like tar. So he called the doctor during office hours.

Know the answers to the following questions before calling the doctor



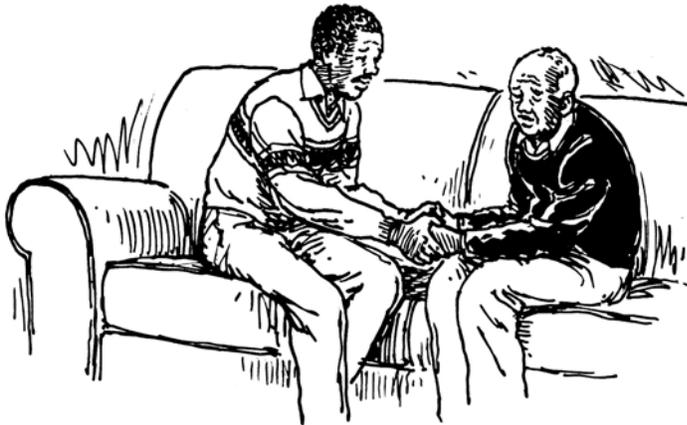
Frank is calling the doctor's office. He has a list of facts ready to answer the doctor or nurse's questions.

- What is the symptom? (Try to be accurate and specific.)
- When did the symptom start?
- Is it a new symptom or an ongoing problem that is now worse?
- How severe is the symptom? Does it interfere with usual activities (such as preparing meals or dressing)?
- What medicines are being taken? (Include prescription and non-prescription.)
- Is the older person following instructions for prescription medicines? If not, what is being taken and how much?
- Has a day or two been skipped in taking prescription medicine?
- Does the older person have any allergies?

Here is an example of what you might say when calling

“Hello. This is Ellen Smith. My mother is Ann Smith, a patient of Dr. Miller's. My mother has had severe nausea for the past 12 hours. Two days ago she started taking Indocin for her arthritis. Dr. Miller prescribed it. Do you think it could be causing the nausea?”

What You Can Do To Help



Fred wants to help his grandfather use his medicines safely.

Keep a record of all medicines taken. Make a list of all the medicines that the older person takes. Include prescription and nonprescription medicines. (Personal medication record books, sometimes called 'medication passports' are available at no cost at some pharmacies) Write the name of each medicine, the doctor who prescribed it, what it is for, the amount taken, the possible side effects, and the times of day it is taken. The older person should keep a copy in the medicine cabinet and in his or her wallet or pocketbook. You should keep a copy too. This record should be reviewed with the doctor at every visit and whenever a doctor prescribes a new medicine.



Lynn makes a list of all the medicines her mother takes and when she takes them. She takes the list with her whenever her mother goes to the doctor.

What you can do to help

Ask about drug allergy bracelets and necklaces. Drug allergy bracelets can be bought in many pharmacies. These are small metal bracelets that can be worn over the wrist or hung on a necklace. For example, a bracelet might say “allergic to penicillin.” Custom medical identification bracelets or necklaces are also available, for a fee, by mail. Some pharmacies will have the application forms. Customized bracelets can tell medical personnel, such as ambulance workers, about the person’s medical conditions, allergies, medicines, and special needs, such as blood type and if the person has a living will. In some instances this information will be provided to health care workers after they call a telephone number imprinted on the bracelet.



*Nancy is asking the man at the drug store about buying a bracelet for her mother. The bracelet will tell what medicines her mother should **not** take.*

Ask the doctor or the doctor’s staff to review all medicines and explain the reason for each medicine at least once a year. As new medical problems occur, new medicines will be prescribed. Sometimes this is done without a complete review of medicines that have already been prescribed. Also, new information about side effects may become available about drugs the older person is taking. Therefore, it is important that medicines be reviewed regularly.



Martha is taking her mother’s medicines to the doctor. She asks the doctor and nurse what each medicine does to help her mother.

What you can do to help

If possible, use only one pharmacy.

This way, the pharmacy will have all of your prescription medications and drug allergy information on their computer. This will be helpful when the pharmacist checks for drug interactions as you get new prescriptions filled. Tell the pharmacist the medical problems that the older person has. Medicines taken for one problem may make another problem worse and the pharmacist may notice this, if it has escaped the doctor's attention.



Anthony always goes to the same pharmacy (drug store) to get his aunt's medicine.

Make sure you understand the label that the pharmacy attaches to the medicine.

Labels can be hard to read and difficult to understand. Ask the pharmacist to explain the information on the label including expiration date, number of refills (if any), and directions for use. If the information is vague, ask for an explanation. For example, if a label says "take 3 times a day" does that mean every 8 hours? Does the patient need to be awakened promptly to take the medication? Should it be taken with meals or an hour before meals? What should you do if a dose is skipped? Can it be taken with other medicines?



Ann is asking the person in the drug store to explain what the label says on her grandfather's medicine.

What you can do to help

Refuse childsafe caps on bottles.

Child safety caps have helped prevent child poisonings, but they can be difficult to open. If it is too much of a struggle, the older person may not take the medicine. If children live in the house or sometimes visit, keep medicines locked up or on a shelf they cannot reach.



Carol cannot open the childsafe caps on her mother's medicine. So she asks the man at the drug store to put a different kind of cap on the medicine bottles. When she comes home, she puts the medicine on a high shelf so children cannot reach them.

Store medicines in a cool, dry place.

Although many people keep their medicines in the bathroom, its high moisture content makes it a poor place to keep them. Many tablets and capsules lose their strength if exposed to moisture or strong heat or light. The bedroom is usually a better location. Store medicines in the refrigerator only if instructed to do so by the pharmacist or if they are labeled "refrigerate." If you do not know how to store the medicine, ask a pharmacist.



Bob starts to put his mother's medicines in the bathroom. But then he remembers that the bathroom is sometimes hot and wet. This is bad for the medicine. So he puts the medicine in the bedroom where it is dry and cool.

What you can do to help

Keep medicines in their original containers. Mixing different pills in one bottle can be confusing and even dangerous. Since many medicines look alike, this can confuse the patient, caregivers, or people who may be called on to help in an emergency.



Edith is putting different pills in the same bottle. This is wrong because then her mother won't know which pills to take.

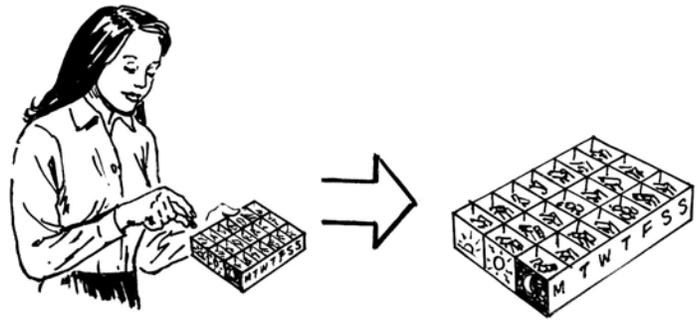
Have the older person sit up or stand when taking pills, and use a half cup of water to wash them down. Water will help prevent the medicine from sticking in the throat and causing irritation. If the older person has difficulty swallowing, ask your pharmacist if the medicine is available in liquid form, or if it is all right to crush the tablet and mix it with applesauce or other soft food. Some tablets or capsules should not be crushed or chewed.



Frank chokes when he takes medicine lying down. So Mary helps him to sit up. Then Frank swallows the medicine easily with some water.

What you can do to help

Use a pillbox. You can buy a pillbox with many compartments at your pharmacy. Some pillboxes have compartments for 7 consecutive days and for times of day the medicine has to be taken: early morning, noon, evening, and bedtime. "Mediset™" is a popular brand of this type of pillbox. There are also pillboxes with alarms to notify you when the next dose should be taken (useful for medicines that require precise timing, such as medicines for Parkinson's disease). For medicines that cannot be placed in a pill box – such as liquids, cream, and patches – a reminder note placed on the refrigerator may be helpful. Keeping medicines on the kitchen table with a note saying when to use them may also be helpful.



Ruth puts her aunt's medicine in a pillbox. The pillbox has boxes for each time of day and for each day of the week. This helps her aunt know what medicines to take each day.

Use reminders. A checklist or marking on a calendar may be helpful to show when medicine should be taken and when it was taken. Alarm clocks can be helpful or you personally may have to remind the older person when to take medicines.



Bob writes on the calendar what medicines his aunt should take. This reminds him when to give her the medicines. Judy sets an alarm clock to remind her mother when to take her medicines.

What you can do to help

Ask about other ways to take medicines. Few people, young or old, can remember to take a medicine three or four times a day. If the person you care for has trouble taking the prescribed medicine, or has trouble remembering to take the medicine, tell the doctor or pharmacist. They may know of a similar medicine that is easier to take, or one that only needs to be taken once a day. Some medicines are available in the form of patches that are placed on the skin and need to be changed only every few days; however, they are usually more expensive than the same medicine in pill form.



Renee's grandfather has trouble remembering when to take his medicines. So Renee asks the doctor if he could take his medicines in other ways that would be easier for him to remember.

What you can do to help

Throw away old medicines. Check the expiration dates on medicine bottles, and throw medicines away if the date has passed. It's usually a good rule of thumb to discard medicines after a year. It is natural to want to hold onto unused medicines (“just in case”), but stockpiles of medicines can be confusing and even dangerous. Some pharmacists highlight the expiration date with a yellow marker; you can do the same thing at home.

This is especially important for nitroglycerin tablets. Some communities have laws about how drugs can be disposed of. For example, it is illegal to flush medications down the toilet in some communities. Ask your pharmacist if it is OK to flush medications down the toilet or if you can return the expired medicines to the pharmacy for disposal



Mary Ann looks at the dates on her mother's medicine bottle and throws away medicines that are a year old.



If she is not sure what to do with the medicines, she takes them to the drug store and asks what to do with the old medicines.

Carrying out your plan



Mary and her mother are working together to carry out their plans.

Problems you might have carrying out your plan

Problem

"I would like to discuss my aunt's medicines with her doctor, but he's so busy. I don't want to bother him."

Response: The medicines your aunt takes are an important part of her care. Her doctor needs to review them with you. If you have trouble bringing it up at the appointment, tell the office staff in advance that you would like the doctor to review all of her medicines at the next visit.

Problem

"I'm too busy to make sure my mother is taking all of her medicines."

Response: There are lots of things that can be done to simplify the medicine-taking routine and to make it easier for her to remember. Pillboxes like Mediset™ can contain all the medicines your mother needs for 7 days, counted out and organized by day, time, and dose. Medicines that can be taken once a day instead of three times a day might also be helpful. Ask your doctor or pharmacist for suggestions.

Problem

"I can tell that the medicine is not helping my father, so I'm not going to give him the medicine anymore."

Response: You shouldn't stop giving a prescription medicine unless your doctor says it's OK. It may be helping in ways that you're not aware of. It may also be the type of medicine that should be stopped gradually, taking smaller and smaller doses until he is off it completely. Some drugs, if suddenly stopped, may cause adverse effects.

Problems you might have carrying out your plan

Problem

"The medicine the doctor prescribed is too expensive."

Response: The high cost of medicines is a major concern for many older people. Medicines not generally covered under Medicare, and many older people don't have the insurance coverage to pay for them.

If the price of medicines is a problem, tell your doctor or pharmacist. Your doctor may be able to prescribe a less expensive medicine, or substitute a generic medicine that does the same thing as the brand name. Generics are generally just as good as the brand names but usually much less expensive. Also, many drug companies have programs that supply their medicines free to patients who have no insurance and cannot afford them. Your physician will have to provide the company with information about your medical condition and inability to pay. Ask your doctor or pharmacist for more information. Also, social workers can tell you about programs or agencies that can give you financial help for medicines.

Think of other problems you might have carrying out your plan

What other problems could get in the way of doing the things suggested in this handout? For example, will the person cooperate? Will other people help? How will you explain your needs to other people? Do you have the time and energy to carry out the plan?

You will need to make plans for solving these problems.

Checking on progress

Managing medications and making sure that they are used safely is an important part of caregiving. If you do a good job, you can prevent many problems. Getting the older person on the right medication schedule can improve his or her life dramatically. Changing or stopping medicines can sometimes improve quality of life including becoming more active, thinking better, and improving sexual functioning. To manage medicines effectively, you have to be organized, persistent, and to constantly ask questions. When you see changes in the older person, always keep in mind that the medicines he or she is taking may play a part.

What to do if your plan isn't working

Improperly managed medicines can be dangerous. If, in spite of your best efforts to use the ideas in this chapter, medicines are not being managed properly, you should get help. You may need the help of a home health nurse, or to bring someone into the home to help manage the medicines, or perhaps this is a time to consider moving to a setting with more structure where someone is paid to be responsible for managing medicines. These range from assisted living settings to nursing homes – depending on the person's needs.

USING MEDICINES SUMMARY



When to call the doctor immediately



Sees or hears things that are not there



Heart beats fast or unevenly



Very hard to wake up



Very bad trembling, cannot control muscle movements, or has seizures



Cannot hold urine or stool when this was not a problem in the past



Cannot urinate



Severe nausea or vomiting



Dizziness, falling, or trouble with balance



Unusual bruising or bleeding from minor cuts

USING MEDICINES SUMMARY

When to call the doctor immediately



Blood in the stool



Very confused



Very tired



Trouble seeing or sees gold halos around things



Hives, severe itching, skin rash or swelling of the face.



Very hard to breathe



Throat swells

USING MEDICINES



When to call the doctor during office hours



Hard to breathe after exercise (If sudden or severe, call the doctor right away)



Feels very tired (If sudden or severe, call the doctor right away)



Depression, feeling sad or won't do things that used to be fun



Constipation



Cough that won't go away



Trouble sleeping

USING MEDICINES SUMMARY

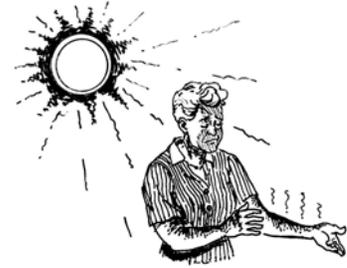
When to call the doctor during office hours



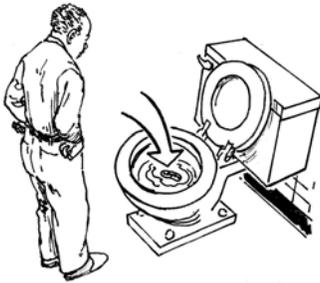
Sexual problems



Feels jittery or afraid



Gets sunburned very easily



Black stool that looks like tar



What you can do to help



Keep a list of all medicines taken.



Ask about drug allergy bracelets and necklaces.



Ask the doctor to review all medicines at least once a year.

USING MEDICINES SUMMARY

What you can do to help



If possible, use only one pharmacy or drug store.



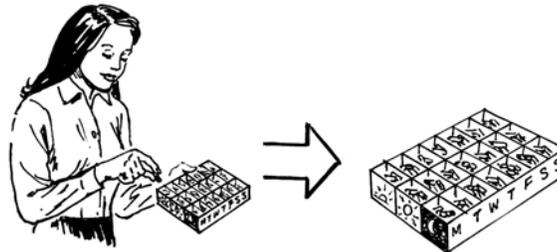
Be sure you understand the label on the medicine.



Don't use childsafe caps on medicine bottles and then put medicines away from children.



Keep medicines in the bottles or boxes they came in.



Use a pillbox.

USING MEDICINES SUMMARY

What you can do to help



Help older person sit up or stand when taking pills, and use a half cup of water to wash them down.



Use calendars and alarm clocks remind when to take medicines.

Ask about easier ways to take medicines.



Throw away old medicines.



Store medicines in a cool, dry place.



The AGS Foundation for Health in Aging (FHA)

Established in 1999 by the American Geriatrics Society, the AGS Foundation for Health in Aging (FHA) builds a bridge between the research and practice of geriatrics health care professionals and the public. FHA advocates on behalf of older adults and their special needs: wellness and preventive care, self-responsibility and independence and connections to the family and community through self-responsibility and independence and connections to the family and community through public education, clinical research and public policy.

Eldercare At Home

Eldercare At Home is part of a comprehensive effort by the AGS Foundation for Health in Aging to provide support and guidance to those of you caring for older people at home. The FHA has created a series of Powerpoint® slide presentations that cover each of the 27 chapters found in *Eldercare At Home*. Accompanying each slide presentation is a fully illustrated handout that can be used as handouts, or as stand-alone resources for caregivers who are dealing with only one or two issues.

The major goal of this initiative is to make *Eldercare at Home* materials available to all caregivers. To this end, the plain text version (without illustrations) of *Eldercare at Home* is available free of charge online at www.healthinaging.org.

Eldercare at Home Workbook is also available for purchase through the FHA. Each of the twenty-seven chapters in the *Eldercare at Home* books cover the most common problems that family caregivers face. The *Eldercare at Home* Workbook can be used just as you would a cookbook. Read a chapter before you start dealing with a specific problem just as you would read a recipe before beginning to cook. Reading the chapter allows you to understand the problem and take action before it becomes severe. *Eldercare at Home* can even help you to prevent some problems from happening. It offers you advice on developing care plans, which will give you a sense of purpose and hope in coping with the challenges of providing care.

For more information on *Eldercare at Home*, or the AGS Foundation for Health in Aging, visit www.healthinaging.org, or call 1-800-563-4916.

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