

Managing Medications

Care Provider Bulletin

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Did you Know?

- Nearly one-third of adults in the U.S. take five or more different medications each day.
- Certain medications can cause serious harm if not administered properly.
- An estimated 450,000 preventable, adverse medication-related events occur in the U.S. every year.
- The most-common problem is new medications are prescribed, but the old ones are not stopped, causing potential toxic side effects.
- Some over the counter (non-prescription) medications and supplements can cause serious side-effects when taken with some prescribed medications.
- Waiting to report a problem with your medication may be too late. Call your doctor's office before the medication problem becomes an emergency.

Medicating Correctly

- Check medications every time you pick them up from the pharmacy to make sure the medication, dose, and frequency match what the doctor prescribed. Confirm you can take them as instructed.
- If you are prescribed medications from several doctors - use only one pharmacy. This enables the pharmacist to check for medication interactions that could be missed if coming from several pharmacies. You should also mention anything bought over-the-counter elsewhere.
- Read the information provided with the medication regarding special instructions and potential side effects. Some medications should be taken with food, while others need to be taken on an empty stomach or should not be taken with certain types of food. Some list side effects that you may not understand. Ask your pharmacist or doctor if you have questions.
- Do not crush or add medications to food or drink without your doctor and pharmacist's approval. The medication may not work correctly if altered or mixed without review, especially if you have special diet needs. Make sure you have written approval.
- Minimize distractions when receiving or administering medications. Taking your time and being consistent on how you do things will be very helpful. Someone talking to you while checking the instructions and administering medications can be as serious as texting in heavy traffic.
- Document all medications administered.
- Have a system for counting medications regularly to make sure they are not lost or stolen.
- Residential agencies must follow nurse delegation rules. For individuals requiring this service, only trained caregivers can give medications.

Storing Medications

- Medications should be kept in specialized pill containers or packaged by the pharmacy into set times and days.
- Some medications have to be stored in the refrigerator, while others need to be kept at room temperature. The medication label should say if it needs to be stored a certain way; if not, ask the pharmacist.
- Medications may need to be secured to ensure only the person for whom they were prescribed takes them.

What Can You do to Increase Medication Safety?

Tracking Medications

- Write the date opened on the prescription label.
- Track when medications will run out.
- Re-order medications at least one week in advance in case the pharmacy needs to contact the doctor for any reason.
- Use a calendar to remind you when medications need to be picked up or delivered from the pharmacy.

Medication Changes

- If the doctor changes medication, make sure the pharmacy knows.
- Notify the delegating nurse of medication changes.
- Make sure all caregivers know of medication changes and side effects to watch for; and when to call a doctor. Noting what and when you felt different will be helpful if the medication needs to be changed.

Missed Medications

- Call the doctor, delegating nurse (if medication has been delegated) or pharmacy if a medication is missed. Know what symptoms to watch for and when to seek medical attention.
- Some doctors write advance orders for what to do if a medication is missed.
- Some medications can be given late, others cannot. Let the doctor tell you what to do for each missed medication.
- If an individual chooses to not take a medication, let their doctor know. Many missed medications could have negative side effects.
- If a doctor, nurse, or pharmacist approves a late dose, make sure all caregivers are informed. Ensure the next scheduled medication time is also adjusted.

PRN, or 'as needed' and Over-the-counter Medications

- PRN is another name for 'as needed' medications. PRN medications can be prescribed for pain or symptoms of illness, or for behavior management such as anxiety.
- Ensure a doctor instructs when PRN medications should be taken.
- Have a plan in place for caregivers to know when PRN medications should be used. If the PRN is delegated, review delegating nurse's instructions.
- If supervisor approval is needed for certain PRN medications, make sure all caregivers are aware.
- Document if the medication was helpful or not. Sometimes a medication can make you feel worse if the situation is different than the last time you used it.
- Anyone taking prescription medications should check with their pharmacist prior to taking over-the-counter medications (to avoid potential drug interactions.)

Expired or Unused Medications

- Check expiration dates on medications regularly. If expired, they should not be used.
- Make sure medications that are not used regularly have not expired. If you have too many expired medications, let your doctor determine if you no longer need them.
- Have a plan for safely disposing of unused or expired medications.

THE FIVE RIGHTS

To reduce medication errors – each time you assist with medications, check the five rights:

- 1. Right person** is receiving the medication
- 2. Right medication** is being administered
- 3. Right dosage** of medication is allotted
- 4. Right time** to receive medication is now
- 5. Right route** for administering the medication is being used



More information:

- **Family Caregiver Alliance**, www.caregiver.org
- **National Council on Patient Information and Education**, www.talkaboutrx.org
- **Caregiver Toolkit, National Council on Patient Information and Education**, ncpie.latticegroup.com/health-education-resources/caregivers
- **Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services**, <https://psnet.ahrq.gov/primers/primer/23/medication-errors>