

Introduction

The American healthcare system is one of the most advanced in the world. However, medication errors do happen which may cause prolonged sickness and even death.

Miscommunication and failure of patients to understand and follow instructions are the most important factors affecting patient safety. You can do a lot to help reduce errors and improve your safety while taking medications.

This reference summary discusses some of the things you can do to ensure your safety and guard against medication errors.

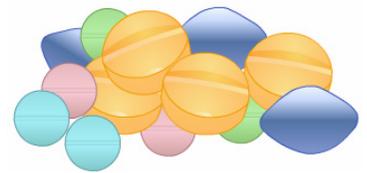


Medication Safety

You are part of your healthcare team every time you take your medications. It is very important that you double-check that you are taking your medications right. To do this, you need to know as much as possible about your medications.

When dropping off prescriptions or requesting refills, tell your pharmacist all the medications and over-the-counter drugs you are taking. He or she will help you find out if there are any harmful drug interactions.

Learn to recognize the medications you take. Learn their colors, shapes, and any symbols or marks printed on them. Certain medications have different colors for different dosages. Liquids usually have a unique scent. When picking up your medications at your pharmacy, open the bottle and look at the medications to confirm that the medications are marked with the correct drug name and strength. If there is no mark, ask the pharmacist to check that they were dispensed from the right bottle.



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All new prescriptions must be dispensed with verbal and written pharmacist instructions. When receiving medications, make sure you understand the following information:

- What did your physician tell you the medication was for?
- What are the brand and generic names? (The brand name is the name given to the medication by the manufacturer. The generic name is the chemical name of the medication.)
- What will the medicine do?
- How many times a day should you take the medicine?
- How many pills should you take at one time?
- How long should you take the medicine?
- How should you take the medicine, with liquid or without anything?
- When should you take the medication, with meals, before meals or after meals?



Understand what to expect from the medication:

- What results should you look for?
- What are the potential side effects?
- How can you recognize a side effect?
- What should you do about side effects if they happen?



Make sure you know how you should store the medication.

Check if refills are necessary and if your doctor's prescription includes refills. It is helpful to maintain a list of all your medications. This list will help you stay organized and will make it easy for you to share information about your medications with your doctors and pharmacist.

If you miss a dose, do not assume that you can double the next scheduled dose. Ask your doctor or pharmacist what you should do if you miss a dose.

Communication

Do not assume that everyone on your healthcare team knows your medical history. You need to repeat it and fill them in. You should be ready to answer many questions. In some cases, you have to volunteer the information without being asked.

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The following are some important pieces of information you need to share:

- Are you taking any prescription medications?
- Are you taking any non-prescription medications?

It is very important to tell your doctor about any medications you are taking, even over-the-counter medications, such as aspirin, Advil®, or herbal supplements.



Your doctors and nurses expect you to ask questions. If you don't understand what someone is telling you, simply ask. If you still don't understand, ask again. If a medication is different from what you were expecting, ask about it.

For instance, if you have been taking an orange pill for a while but now you are given a green one instead, find out why before you take it. Ask, for instance, "Why is this pill different from the one I took before?" Asking simple questions can prevent harmful mistakes.

In order to not forget your medical conditions, previous surgeries, or the medications you are taking, you can make a list of them, and update it regularly. This will be your medical history. Having this document typed or in an electronic format will allow you to share information with your healthcare providers easily.

Patient Advocate

Illness is a stressful time for patients, and you are not at your best when you are sick. Consider bringing a patient advocate to help you receive the best healthcare and understand how to take your medications.



A patient advocate can be a family member, such as a spouse or a child, or a close friend who will act as your supporter, backer, or spokesperson. Some hospitals may have professionals, called Patient Representatives or Patient Advocates, who play this role.

Conclusion

You can help your healthcare team protect your safety and avoid medication errors and misunderstanding.

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Remember these points:

1. Give information to your healthcare team about your health and the medications you take.
2. Ask questions to make sure you understand what you are being told.
3. Bring an advocate if you need help talking to your doctors or nurses.
4. Follow the instructions given to you.
5. Ask your pharmacist for medication instructions and make sure you understand them.



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