

Medicines and Drugs—

A Safety Checklist

Medicines—both over-the-counter (OTC) and prescription—are a part of most people's lives. To use medicines safely and effectively, keep the following points in mind.

What Is Dangerous?

If two or more drugs have the same effect, they may have a greater impact together than you might expect. For instance, a cold medication with antihistamine can dangerously increase the sedative effects of some painkillers, tranquilizers, anesthetics and barbiturates. On the other hand, an antacid can cause a blood-thinning drug to be absorbed too slowly to do much good or can make certain antibiotics useless.

Some foods, beverages and activities also don't mix with prescribed medications. Alcohol can be particularly toxic. Because it's a drug rather than a food, it can produce serious side effects and is potentially fatal when taken with other drugs. Never consume alcohol with a drug intended for psychiatric or emotional problems, such as lithium carbonate or MAO inhibitors.

Side Effects Can Compromise Safety

Many OTC medicines, such as cough, cold, allergy, weight loss and nerve-calming tablets can impair your reaction time, possibly affecting your driving or ability to operate power tools safely. Some drugs or drug combinations can also cause nausea, stomachache, irregular heartbeat, prolonged vomiting, loss of consciousness, stroke, blindness, and seizures or reactions that poison your blood, raise your blood pressure or contribute to overweight.

Both prescription and OTC drugs may be more potent than you realize, whether they warn you about side effects or not. However, some people come to depend on such drugs specifically for the numbing or dizzying side effects. People can get hooked on sleeping aids or on laxatives, antacids or nose sprays. Such people are abusing the medicine and may be just as seriously addicted as a cocaine addict.

In addition, OTC alternative medicines such as herbs, vitamins and other supplements can cause serious adverse reactions. Because dosages and strengths differ according to brand and manufacturer, interactions between prescribed medications and OTC supplements can have dangerous consequences.

Toddlers and young children often mistake medicines for candy with disastrous results. Likewise, some drugs are harmful to people with high blood pressure, kidney or heart disease or diabetes. Pregnant women (or women planning to get pregnant in the near future) need to check with their doctor or pharmacist before taking any drugs.

Remember, any chemical agent strong enough to cure an ailment is also strong enough to cause harm if not used wisely.

A Medicine and Drug Safety Checklist

- Always tell your doctor what medicines you're already taking when a new one is prescribed. And check with your doctor before taking combinations of over-the-counter medicines. If you're pregnant or have diabetes, check with your doctor before taking any medicine or consuming anything with caffeine.
- To avoid the toxicity or double-dose effects of certain drug combinations, learn the chemical names of common remedies. Some remedies may also have unwanted ingredients, such as alcohol, aspirin or caffeine.
- If you need to take a medicine at night, turn the light on to avoid taking the wrong medicine.
- Store medicines together in a location separate from chemicals and foods. The best location is a locked cabinet in your bedroom rather than in the bathroom where humidity can dilute their potency.
- Always keep medicines out of the reach of children, including children who are visitors. Children can be amazing climbers.
- Store medicines in their original, labeled containers with childproof caps.
- All medicines have an expiration date on them. Outdated medicines may be harmful or may no longer be effective. Discard outdated medicines by flushing them down the toilet.
- If the label comes off a container and there's any doubt about which medicine it is, discard it.
- Seniors taking multiple drugs and other medications should always carry a list of medicines, dosages and times in case of an emergency.