

MEDICAL PHARMACIES PHARMACY CARE NEWS

Information for Residents and their Families

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Polypharmacy: What It Is & Why You Need to Know about It

Polypharmacy is the medical term that refers to the effects of taking a number of different medications to manage several health conditions—for example, taking medicines for high blood pressure, arthritis, and diabetes.

Polypharmacy is most likely to become a problem when a person gets prescriptions from more than one doctor, such as from a family physician plus one or more specialists. Each of the doctors you see must know about all of the medicines you take; otherwise, one doctor might prescribe a drug that should not be taken along with another drug you are on.

In addition to making sure every doctor you see has a complete list of your medicines, you should also speak with your pharmacist. As the medication expert on your healthcare team, the pharmacist is the perfect person to review all of your medicines to make sure they won't interact badly with one another. Drug interactions can happen when one drug stops another from

working properly, when one drug causes another to become more powerful than is healthy, or when two or more drugs combine to produce dangerous side effects. It is important to keep in mind that over-the-counter drugs (medicines that don't require a prescription) and natural health products can also interact with prescription drugs and cause problems, so make sure your pharmacist is aware of all of the health products you take.

Polypharmacy becomes more common as we age. In fact, it is estimated that about half of people over the age of 65 take five or more medications each week, and over 10% take ten or more. Adding to the problem is the fact that as we age, our body begins to react differently to the medicines we take, even if we've been taking the same medicines for a long time. This can happen for a number of reasons. One reason is that the amount of water in our body decreases and the amount of fat increases as we get older, and this can affect how we absorb the drugs we take. Drugs that are water-soluble will be stronger, because they are concentrated in a smaller amount of water. Fat-soluble drugs can take longer to be eliminated from our body. As we get older, blood flow to our kidneys and liver (the organs where the body processes medications) can change, and this can also have an effect on how our body reacts to the medicines we take, usually causing side effects.

In general, the more medicines a person takes, the greater the risk for possible drug interactions. However, this does not mean you should decide on your own to stop taking some of your medications. Stopping a medication too early can cause a health condition to return or worsen, and stopping some drugs abruptly can cause serious side effects. A better answer is to understand your medicines and take steps to ensure that you are taking them properly.

Taking Your Medicines Properly

A few simple guidelines will help you get the most benefit from your medicines and will reduce the chances of a drug interaction or side effects.

- Always take your medicines exactly as prescribed—the right dose at the right time every time. Know if you should take it with food or on an empty stomach, whether there are any foods or beverages you should avoid while on the medicine, and when you should stop taking the medicine. If there is anything about the instructions you don't understand or if you have any questions about the medicines you take, your pharmacist will be happy to help you.
- If you take your medicine with water, drink a full glass (250 mL/8 oz.). Don't just sip enough water to get the pill down. Not drinking enough water can prevent some medicines from working properly and in some cases can cause throat irritation.
- Some medicines must be swallowed whole to work properly and not cause side effects. Do not break or crush a tablet or open a capsule without first checking with your pharmacist.
- Find out ahead of time what to do if you miss a dose. Do **not** assume it's okay to double up on your next dose.
- Know the possible side effects your medicines could cause, how to reduce the possibility of side effects happening, and what you should do if you experience any side effects.
- Do not stop taking a prescription medication without first talking to your pharmacist or doctor.
- Never take medication that was prescribed for someone else or give your medicine to anyone. There are good reasons why doctors

prescribe different medicines for different people. Healthcare is not a one-size-fits-all situation.

- If you find it difficult to remember to take all of your medicines, ask your pharmacist about pill organizers or compliance packaging.

How a Medication Review Can Help You

A medication review is an opportunity to meet one-on-one with your pharmacist, who will help you understand each of the medicines you are taking and how best to take each one.

When you schedule your medication review, your pharmacist will sit down with you and review all of the medicines you take—prescription medications, over-the-counter drugs, supplements, and natural products. Your pharmacist will:

- Check to make sure that the drugs you are taking won't interact with each other and cause problems.
- Discuss which medications may cause an increased risk for falling or creating confusion.
- Ensure that you are taking your medications properly and review the instructions to make sure you understand how and when to take each dose.
- Answer any questions you have about your medications.

Speak with your pharmacist about scheduling a medication review annually, before or after a hospital visit, or whenever there is a change to your medical condition or medication regimen. Residents living in long-term care homes automatically receive a medication review by the pharmacist every three months, and the residents and their family members are encouraged to participate in the review.

