

SPEAK UP FOR BETTER SAFER HEALTH CARE

Managing your medication safely



Over 80,000 people are admitted to Australian hospitals each year as the result of problems with medication, such as adverse reactions.

Medication errors happen every day—at the doctor's office or hospital, even at home. You can be given the wrong type or even the wrong amount of medication. These errors may occur, for example, if your medication has a similar brand name or packaging to another type, or if one medication interferes with another. Errors can also occur if you miss a dose, take the wrong dose, or misunderstand the written and oral instructions. Your health condition may also increase the possibility of side effects from your medication.

What's in this brochure?

This brochure contains questions and guidance to help prevent errors with your medication.

Who is responsible for my medication?

A lot of people—including you!

- > If you're taking more than one type of medication, your doctor should ensure that they are okay to take together. This also includes vitamins, dietary supplements or natural remedies.
- > Your pharmacist should check to see if there is any other medication, food or drink you should not take with your new medication. This helps to avoid a bad reaction.
- > Nurses and other caregivers may prepare medication or give them to you.

Managing your medication safely

All medications have risks and benefits. Sometimes you may need to take several types at different times and in varying doses. When you are prescribed

a medication, make sure you tell your GP or healthcare provider:

- > the health-related problem you are being treated for and any other health problems you may have
- > other medications that you are taking, including natural and herbal medication and non-prescription medication
- > any drug allergies you are aware of and any problems you have had with medications in the past
- > whether you are pregnant or breast feeding or if there is a chance you may become pregnant while taking the medication
- > any lifestyle factors that may affect your health, eg. smoking or alcohol consumption.

What should I know about my medication?

- > Make sure you can read the handwriting on the prescription. If you can't read it, the pharmacist may not be able to read it either. You can ask to have the prescription printed.
- > Read the label. Make sure it has your name on it and the right medication name.
- > Make sure you understand all the instructions for your medication before you leave the hospital or pharmacy. This includes any instructions about whether you should continue to take the medications you were taking before coming into hospital.
- > If you have doubts about a medication, talk to your GP, pharmacist or caregiver about it.

What written records should I keep?

Ask your pharmacist or GP to fill in a MediList showing all medication you regularly use (including those prescribed by doctors and bought from pharmacies, supermarkets or health food shops). Update your MediList whenever a medication is added or changes. To obtain a MediList, visit the Commonwealth Department of Health and Ageing's website at www.health.gov.au or call the PBS Information Line on 1800 020 613.

What if I forget the instructions for taking my medication or I am not sure about taking it?

Talking to your GP or pharmacist is the first step. Don't be afraid to ask questions about your medication. Your GP or pharmacist can give you a Consumer Medication Information (CMI) leaflet or you can download information from the 'Consumers' page of the National Prescribing Service website at www.nps.org.au/consumers or call the National Prescribing Service Medicines Line on 1300 888 763. CMI leaflets are available for all prescription medication as well as for some medication bought without a prescription.

What can I do at home to avoid errors with my medication?

- > Know the names of your medication, and what they look like.
- > Read the Consumer Medicines Information leaflets and keep them handy for future reference.
- > Use a dosage box to reduce the likelihood of mixing up your medication or forgetting to take your medication. You can purchase a dosage box from pharmacies or supermarkets.

Alternatively, many pharmacies will prepare a dosage box or special packaging for a fee.

- > Obtaining your medication from the same pharmacy every time may be advantageous, so your pharmacist can keep a record and alert you to any dangerous interactions.
- > If you are too unwell or find it difficult to monitor your medications, ask a family member or friend to help.
- > Take out-of-date or unused medication to your pharmacy for safe disposal.
- > See your doctor every six to twelve months to have your medication reviewed.

What can I do at the hospital or clinic to help avoid errors with my medication?

- > Make sure your doctors, nurses and other caregivers check your wristband and ask your name before giving you medication.
- > Don't be afraid to tell a caregiver if you think you are about to get the wrong medication or if it looks different.
- > Ask what each medication and dose is. If it is not what you expected, ask for an explanation.
- > Know what time you should receive your medication. Let your caregiver know if this is delayed.
- > Tell your caregiver if you don't feel well after taking a medication. Ask for help immediately if you think you are experiencing a side effect or having a reaction.
- > You may be given IV (intravenous) fluids. Tell your caregiver if you experience pain or discomfort at the IV site.

SPEAK UP FOR BETTER SAFER HEALTH CARE

Managing your medication safely

What questions should I ask my doctor or pharmacist?

Write down the things you need to ask before you see your doctor or pharmacist. Take the list with you on your next visit. Make sure you have time to get the information you need by making a longer appointment with your doctor or, if possible, visiting your pharmacist during quieter hours (ask when these are).

Ask what the medication is for

- > Why am I using this medication?
- > When will I start to see changes in my health?
- > How will this new medication help me?
- > Are there other names for this medication?
- > Is it safe to take this medication with my other medication? Is it safe to take it with my vitamins and supplements?

Ask how to use the medication

- > What is the dosage I need to take?
- > How many times a day do I need to take it?
- > What should I do if I forget to take a dose?
- > Is there written information about the medication? Is there an information leaflet?

Ask when to stop using any of your medication

- > Do I have to finish all of the medication?
- > Will I need to take this medication for an extended period? If yes, how long?
- > When I start using a new medication, should I stop using any of my others?

Ask about special instructions

- > Are there any special instructions for using this medication? For instance, do I take it before, with or after a meal?

- > If I have to use a special device, what is the correct way to use it?
- > Can I take this medication with my allergy? Remind your doctor about allergies and reactions you have had to medication.

Ask about side effects

- > What side effects do I need to watch for? For example, upset stomach or headache.
- > What should I do if I get a side effect?
- > Who can I call if I experience side effects or have a bad reaction? Can they be reached 24 hours a day, seven days a week?

Ask what to do, and not to do, while using the medication

- > Is there any medication I should not use at the same time?

- > Are there foods or drinks I should avoid while taking it? Can I drink alcohol when using this medication?
- > Do I need monitoring or testing? For example, do I need to keep a symptom diary or monitor my blood levels?
- > How often do I need to have my medication reviewed?
- > How should I store this medication?

Where do I go for further information about better medication management?

Further information and tips about how you can better manage your medication can be found in the 'Be wise with medicine' brochure on the Commonwealth Department of Health and Ageing's website: www.health.gov.au or call 1800 020 613.

Adapted from Joint Commission on Accreditation of Health Care Organization (2005). Help avoid mistakes with your medicines (www.jointcommission.org/PatientSafety/Speakup/).

The information contained in this document is general in nature and comprises suggestions for how you may actively participate in ensuring that you receive the best quality healthcare. It is intended as a guide and does not cover every possible circumstance. Your GP, specialists, nurses and other healthcare providers are the persons who are best placed to provide you with specific advice in relation to your particular medical condition and health.