Medication Safety
for Older Adults

Be your own advocate

Medication safety becomes increasingly important as we age. Older adults are more likely to take multiple medications, including over-the-counter medications, prescribed by multiple health care providers. You are the most important part of your healthcare team. Take the time to become familiar with the medications you take. Ask questions and be sure you understand what each medication does and how it can affect you.

- If you see more than one health care provider who is prescribing medication for you, tell each one about all the medicines and supplements you take – don’t assume they know.

- Be alert to new symptoms or health issues and contact your health care professional or pharmacist if you feel they could be due to a new medication or a change in dose or frequency.

- If you have trouble hearing or understanding your health care provider, bring a trusted friend or family member with you to appointments to take notes, or ask the provider if it would be okay for you to record your conversation with a tape recorder or cell phone.

- If possible, fill all your prescriptions at a single pharmacy; doing so allows the pharmacist to better identify potential interactions.

- Go over your full list of medications with your doctor at each visit, but at least once a year. Confirm that all the medications you are taking are still necessary and determine which (if any) you can stop taking.

- If you’ve been taking a medication (prescription or non-prescription) for a long time, ask your health care professional if it is still appropriate for you. The way your body processes medications changes with age.
Keep a list of your medications

Older adults are more likely to take multiple medications, including over-the-counter medications. This increases the risk for reactions, such as falls, depression, confusion and malnutrition.

Maintain an updated, complete list of medications you take, including prescription and non-prescription (over-the-counter) medicines, natural and herbal remedies, as well as any vitamins or supplements.

Carry your list of medications in your purse or wallet, or store it on your mobile phone. Bring it with you to every doctor appointment, as well as to the pharmacy when you pick up your prescriptions. Share your list with a trusted loved one or friend, in case of emergency.

Information to include:

- **What you take**: The medicine’s generic and brand names (if known)
- **Why you take it**: The symptoms or conditions the medication is intended to treat
- **How much you take**: The prescribed dosage, usually in milligrams (mg) and
- **How often you take it**: The frequency with which you take it (e.g., once daily, three times a day)
- **When you take it**: The time of day you take the medication (e.g., at bedtime, with dinner)
- **Who told you to take it and when**: The name of the doctor or other health care professional who prescribed the medication and when you started taking it, or the last time the dosage or frequency was changed (increased or decreased).
# Medication Safety for Older Adults

Use this form to record your prescription and non-prescription medicines, vitamins and supplements. Bring it to every doctor appointment. Share the location of this with a trusted family member or friend.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Medicine I take</th>
<th>Why I take it</th>
<th>How much I take</th>
<th>How often I take</th>
<th>When I take it</th>
<th>Who told me to take it and when</th>
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<td>Ex: Lisinopril</td>
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<td>Ex: 20 mg</td>
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Questions to ask your doctor or pharmacist

Older adults are more likely to take multiple medications prescribed by multiple health care providers. When your health care professionals prescribe a new medication or change your dosage, make sure you understand why they are prescribing it, how to take it properly and how it might affect you.

Questions to ask include:

- **Purpose:** What is this medicine supposed to do? How will I know if it’s working? Will I need regular tests to monitor my treatment?
- **Options:** Can this medicine replace another medicine I am taking? Is there another way to treat this condition or symptom without medication?
- **Duration:** How long will I take this medicine? Can I stop once I feel better?
- **Side Effects:** What symptoms or side effects can I expect with this medicine? Which ones should I be the most concerned about?
- **Accidents:** What will happen if I miss a dose or accidentally take too much of this medicine?
- **Reactions** Can this medicine react with food or drink, over-the-counter medicines, other prescriptions or herbal or vitamin supplements?
- **Addiction:** Can I become addicted to this medicine? Should I be concerned about others having access to this medicine?
- **Ownership:** Are there any legal or safety issues I should consider about buying and owning this medication?
- **Directions:** What does it mean to take this medication... On an empty stomach? With food or meals? With plenty of water? Two/three/four times a day? “As needed”?
Dispose of your medications safely

Owning and taking medications comes with the responsibility to use the medicine as intended and prevent others from being exposed to it. This includes all types of medications, such as pills, capsules, gels, chewables, liquids, creams, eye or ear drops, nasal sprays, inhalers, vitamins and dietary supplements.

Keeping medications past their usefulness can be dangerous for a number of reasons. Some medications can become more or less potent over time and can also develop undesired side effects. Also, keeping medications in your home that you do not need increases the risk for accidental (or intentional) misuse. Medications that you will no longer take or that have passed the expiration date on their label should be disposed of properly and promptly.

- Tell your pharmacist the name of the medications that you wish to dispose of and ask about the most appropriate means of disposal.
- Follow any specific disposal instructions on the package or Drug Facts labels of non-prescription medications.
- Do not flush any medications down the sink or toilet unless the package or your doctor or pharmacist specifically instructs you to do so.
- For medications that can be disposed of in the regular trash, mix the medicine with an undesirable substance, such as kitty litter or used coffee grounds, then place into a sealable bag, bottle or container to reduce the risk of other people or animals consuming them. Do not crush tablets or capsules that will be disposed of in the regular trash.
- For medications that cannot be thrown in the regular trash, check with local pharmacies, law enforcement agencies or trash and recycling providers about medication disposal guidelines and options (e.g., drop box sites or Drug Take Back Day activities) in your community.
- Remove and destroy prescription labels, or scratch out identifying information on the label to make it unreadable.
Medication Safety for Older Adults

Store medications safely

Most people who misuse prescription drugs get them from family or friends. It is your responsibility to protect your medications from theft and misuse by others. In addition, some medicines can become less effective or take on unwanted effects if not stored correctly.

- Store medications in cool, dry and secure locations, such as lockboxes, medication safes, lockable drawers or other lockable spaces away from heat, moisture or humidity. Heat, air, light and moisture may damage your medications or make it less potent. (The medicine cabinet in your bathroom is one of the worst places to store your medicines.)

- Avoid storage places that children or others can easily access, such as drawers, nightstands or kitchen counters or cabinets - even if you rarely have visitors or children in your home.

- Keep your medications in their original containers. If you use pill organizers to manage your medications, put only the medicines you need for a reasonable time in the organizers and keep the rest in the original containers.

- Do not store other items in your medication containers. This includes the cotton packing that comes with many new bottles of medicine; remove and discard it upon opening for the first time.

- Dispose of unused or expired medications promptly and properly.

- Review your full list of medications with your pharmacist and ask if any of them have specific storage instructions.
Take your medications safely

About three out of five older adults take their prescriptions improperly and 140,000 older Americans die each year as a result. Listen closely when your health care professional prescribes a medication for you, and always follow your doctor’s directions when taking your medicine.

- Ask about directions you don’t understand, such as “take with food,” “on an empty stomach,” “once/twice/three times/four times daily,” and “as needed.”
- Check the label to make sure that the drug name, dosage and directions are the same as what your doctor told you.
- Do not take prescription medications that were not prescribed for you by one of your health care providers.
- Do not share your prescription medicines or take someone else’s medications (in some cases, sharing medication may be against the law).
- If you experience side effects (particularly after starting the medicine or increasing the dose), talk to your doctor or pharmacist immediately.
- Don’t stop taking your prescription medication, skip doses or otherwise change the amount of the medicine you take without talking to your health care provider (even if you feel better or think the medication isn’t working).
- If you cannot afford your prescribed medications, ask your health care provider or pharmacist if there is a less expensive alternative.
- If you cannot read your medication label or have trouble opening the container it is in, ask your pharmacist about alternative labels and packaging.
- Read the information that your pharmacist includes with your medicine. If you don’t understand something, ask your doctor or pharmacist to explain.
- If you have trouble sticking to your medication schedule, ask your doctor or pharmacist about ideas and products to help, such as linking medicines with daily routines, using a pill organizer, computer or smart phone reminders and more.
When medications can cause harm: Misuse, abuse and addiction

While medications are generally intended to make us feel better by treating disease or managing symptoms, they can be harmful in some situations. Reasons older adults may be more likely to misuse medications include taking multiple medications from different prescribers, changes in how our bodies process medications and issues with vision, hearing and brain function. Misuse sometimes can lead to drug abuse or addiction.

Medication misuse includes:

- Taking more or less of a prescription medication than prescribed;
- Taking a prescription medication for a reason different than what is was prescribed for; or
- Sharing or taking someone else’s prescription medication.

Signs of abuse or addiction include:

- Changes in expected emotional response and rapid mood swings;
- Dramatic changes in sleep patterns;
- Unexplained missing personal items and money;
- Frequent doctor visits;
- Sudden dramatic weight loss;
- Constipation without reasonable explanation;
- Small or pinpoint pupils;
- Smoking or frequent abuse of alcohol;
- Aggressive behavior to obtain prescriptions;
- Sharing medications;
- Increasing dose without discussing with a health care provider; and
- Personal or family history of substance abuse.

For info about addiction services and referral, call the Ohio Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services at 1-877-275-6364.
When medications can cause harm: Falls

While medications are generally intended to make us feel better by treating disease or managing symptoms, they can be harmful in some situations. Certain medications can have side effects that include dizziness, drowsiness, numbness, dehydration, lack of balance, vision impairment and more. These symptoms and others can increase your risk of falling.

To reduce your risk of falling:

- Discuss your medicines and your concerns about falling with your doctor at every visit or at least once a year. Ask about a falls risk assessment.
- Read the prescription label and Drug Facts materials; look for warnings about drowsiness, dizziness, muscle pain or weakness, joint pain, lack of balance, or driving or operating machinery while taking.
- Work with your doctor to decrease the dose, stop the medication, or switch it to a better alternative. Do not stop a medication without talking to your doctor.
- Whenever your health care provider gives you a new prescription, ask if the new medication(s) could increase your risk of falling.
- Ask your health care professional about alternative treatments that will treat your symptoms or condition without increasing your risk of falling.
When medications can cause harm:
Non-prescription does not equal safe

While medications are generally intended to make us feel better by treating disease or managing symptoms, they can be harmful in some situations. Many older adults are hospitalized because of problems related to non-prescription (or over-the-counter) pills, liquids, medicated creams, lotions and other formulations.

**Non-prescription medicines should be treated with the same care and respect as prescription medications.**

- Tell your health care provider about all the prescription and non-prescription medicines you take. Since many prescription and non-prescription medications contain the same ingredients or have the same effects, taking them together can amplify these effects and cause problems.

- Read and follow instructions on the Drug Facts label on non-prescription packaging. If you’ve been taking non-prescription medications (including common pain and allergy remedies) for a long time, read the label to make sure you are still taking them according to manufacturer’s recommendations.

- Certain medical conditions (such as high blood pressure or asthma) can make some common non-prescription medications unsafe for you to take. If your health care professional diagnoses you with a new condition, ask if any of the non-prescription medications you take could be a problem.

- Pick non-prescription medications that treat only the symptoms you have and contain only the ingredients you need. Avoid multi-symptom remedies unless otherwise directed by your health care professional or pharmacist.

- Non-prescription medications are usually intended for short-term use. If your symptoms don’t go away within a reasonable time, or worsen, talk to your health care provider.
When medications can cause harm:
Protecting our children and grandchildren

While medications are generally intended to make us feel better by treating disease or managing symptoms, they can be harmful in some situations.

Facts about youth drug use:

- According to the National Institute on Drug Abuse (National Institutes of Health), young adults and teens are the biggest abusers of prescription pain relievers, ADHD medications and anti-anxiety drugs.
- One in four teens will misuse or abuse a prescription drug at least once in their lifetime.
- Most people who misuse prescription drugs, including teens and young adults, get them from family or friends, sometimes with their knowledge, but often without it.
- More than 40 percent of teens who misuse prescription drugs get them from their parents’ medicine cabinets.
- Children whose families talk to them about drug abuse are 50 percent less likely to misuse them.

Keeping your prescription medications out of site and out of reach will help prevent the children in your life from having access to medications that could harm them if not used properly.

Talk to the young people in your life about the dangers of prescription drug misuse, abuse and addiction.
When medications can cause harm: Side effects and interactions

While medications are typically designed to provide the same benefit for all users, physical changes as we age can cause a drug to work differently or cause unintended side effects.

Drug interactions can occur when:

- One medication affects how another one works;
- A medical condition you have makes a certain medication potentially harmful;
- An herbal preparation or supplement affects the action of a medication;
- An over-the-counter remedy affects the action of a medication;
- A food or non-alcoholic drink reacts with a medication; or
- An alcoholic drink interacts with a medication.

Some medicines that work well for most adults may not be recommended for older adults. These potentially harmful medications are included in a widely used tool for health care professionals called the “Beers List,” named for the physician who created it. Ask your health care provider about the Beers List and whether any of the medications you take are on it. The American Geriatrics Society’s Health in Aging Foundation advises older adults to be careful with certain types of medications, including:

- Nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) used to treat pain and inflammation;
- Specific medicines used to treat heart failure and irregular heartbeat;
- Some diabetes drugs;
- Muscle relaxants;
- Certain medications used to treat anxiety or insomnia;
- Certain anticholinergic drugs;
- Certain non-prescription remedies for coughs, cold and allergies; and
- Antipsychotics.
Pain management: Alternatives to medications for chronic pain

Pain is complex, which is a good thing because this means there are a variety of ways to treat it, with and without medication, depending on the cause and type of the pain. No single technique can be guaranteed to relieve pain, so a combination of approaches is generally recommended. Talk to your health care provider about your pain management options and which ones might be right for you.

Alternatives to medications for treating chronic pain include:

- Prescription and non-prescription medications;
- Trigger point injections;
- Surgical implants;
- Electrical stimulation;
- Bioelectric therapy;
- Physical therapy;
- Exercise;
- Psychological treatment;
- Mind-body therapies (relaxation techniques, meditation, guided imagery, biofeedback and hypnosis);
- Acupuncture;
- Chiropractic treatment and massage;
- Nutritional supplements and herbal remedies; and
- Special diets.

The Ohio Department of Aging, through Ohio’s area agencies on aging, offers Chronic Pain Self-Management workshops around the state. These free or low-cost programs are six-week, community-based workshops that can help you learn proven strategies to manage chronic pain and health conditions and to feel healthier.
Pain management: Opioids

Treating pain in older adults can present significant challenges. Opioids are a group of drugs generally used to relieve severe, acute, temporary pain. They are powerful drugs and are commonly prescribed following surgeries and to treat conditions with high levels of pain. They can have mild side effects, such as sleepiness, or more serious side effects, such as slowed breathing and heart rate. They also can be highly addictive because of the relaxed feeling or “high” they produce.

Common names of opioid medications include Vicodin, Percocet, oxycodone, hydrocodone, morphine and codeine. Overdose, brain damage and death are serious concerns with this class of drugs, as are serious withdrawal symptoms after stopping the medication.

According to the 2018 Ohio Health Issues Poll, about three out of 10 Ohioans have been prescribed a pain reliever in the past five years and one in 10 of these say their prescriber gave them more medicine than they needed.

Although opioids are not appropriate to treat long-term, chronic pain, your health care professional may prescribe them when non-prescription remedies (e.g., aspirin, Tylenol, Advil) aren’t effective or no longer relieve your pain. These medicines come with serious risks for you to consider, including:

- Potential psychological dependence or addiction;
- Unintentional overdose;
- Serious side effects, such as sedation, nausea or vomiting; and
- Other individuals stealing or accessing your prescribed medications without permission.

To reduce these risks, follow your doctor’s instructions carefully and take the medication exactly as prescribed. Make sure your health care provider knows about other medications and supplements you are taking when he or she prescribes an opioid for you.