

## Senior Health: High-Risk Medicines



If you are age 65 or older, use special care when you take medicine.

Even when you are feeling strong and well, your body is handling medicine differently than it used to.

As you age, your body changes. Your kidneys and liver process some medicines more slowly. As your muscle mass and body fat change, some medicines stay in your body longer. So when you take a medicine, you may get a stronger or weaker effect now than in the past. You may be more likely to have side effects. And if you are taking more than one medicine, there is a chance that together, they could cause problems.

With your help, your doctor can make sure that your medicine is safe and meets your needs.

### What are high-risk medicines?

"High-risk" means a medicine can cause serious health problems or accidents if you don't use it as directed. For example, a high-risk medicine can be:

- A medicine that raises your risk of drowsiness or confusion, depression, organ damage, serious harm from a fall, or other dangerous side effects.
- A medicine for one health problem that makes another health problem worse.
- Two or more medicines that are dangerous when taken together. The more medicines you take, the greater the risk that this can happen.

High-risk does not always mean "do not use." It can mean "use with care."

### What counts as medicine?

"Medicine" includes all prescription and over-the-counter medicines, herbs, homeopathic remedies, dietary supplements, and vitamins. All of these can have powerful effects on the body. Some can also cause bad interactions when taken together.

For example, garlic and ginseng can increase your chance of bleeding. Either could be dangerous if taken with aspirin or warfarin, which also can raise the chance of bleeding.

### How can you avoid problems?

Work closely with your doctor and pharmacist to help avoid problems with your medicine.

#### Be organized

- **Use a medicine organizer** if you take more than one medicine. This is a plastic pillbox with a space to hold each day's medicines. Keep at least one pill in each original bottle to help you identify the medicine.

- **Make a list of everything you take**, including the dose and when you take it. Keep a copy in your purse or wallet, and take it to each doctor or hospital visit. Ask your doctor if there are any medicines on your list that you do not need or should not take. Anytime you see a new doctor, show him or her your list.
- **Use one drugstore**, if possible. Before filling any new prescription, give the pharmacist your list of medicines. Ask about possible interactions with anything you are taking. If you use more than one drugstore, make sure each of them has your list.

### Learn about your medicines

- **Know your medicines by name**, and understand what they do. Ask your doctor or pharmacist about side effects and problems to be careful about. Read all the information sheets that come with your medicines.
- **Learn about drug interactions**. If you take more than one medicine, ask your doctor to run the drug names through a drug interaction

checker. This is a computer database that checks for medicines that can have bad interactions. If you find a problem, talk to your doctor.

### Work with your doctor, and take risks seriously

- **Always talk to your doctor first**. Do not take any medicine, either prescription or over-the-counter, without first talking to your doctor or pharmacist. Something as simple as a cold medicine or an herb may not mix well with the medicines you already take.
- **Watch for side effects**. Call your doctor about new or ongoing side effects, such as upset stomach or dizziness. If a medicine makes you feel dizzy, confused, or drowsy, follow your doctor's advice and rest until the side effect has passed. Do not try to drive, use stairs, or use dangerous tools.
- **Get lab tests done**. If your doctor orders lab tests to check how your body is handling a medicine, be sure to get them done.

## Questions to ask your doctor

List your questions or concerns below. Take this sheet with you to your next doctor visit.

### Questions about medicines you take: