

Your Health: Staying Safe When You Take Several Medicines



Polypharmacy means "many medicines." It is common for older adults or people with long-term diseases to take a lot of medicines.

With your help, your doctor can make sure that all the medicines you take work well together.

Polypharmacy becomes a problem if you take more than one medicine that works the same way, so you get too high a dose. Or you may take medicines that interact in a bad way. This is more likely if:

- You see more than one doctor and do not tell all your doctors about the medicines you take.
- You use more than one drugstore, so your pharmacist does not know all the medicines you take.

- You take over-the-counter medicines or supplements without talking to your doctor or pharmacist first.

Understanding polypharmacy can help you avoid problems from your medicines and stay healthy.

Who is at risk for polypharmacy?

Older adults have the highest risk for polypharmacy. As you age, you become more sensitive to medicines. Your kidneys and liver—the organs that process most medicines—may be slower, so medicines may build up in your body. You may get the same effect as if you had taken a larger dose. Also, you lose muscle mass, so you have more fat than muscle. This means that some medicines may build up in your body.

Older adults are more likely to take several types of medicines. Many take five or more prescription medicines. On top of this, they may take herbs or vitamins. The more medicines you take, the greater your chance of having problems.

What counts as medicine?

Medicines can be sold by prescription or over the counter. Many people do not understand that herbs, homeopathic remedies, dietary supplements, and vitamins can have powerful effects on the body. They can also cause bad interactions if you combine them with other medicines.

For example, ginseng and garlic may raise your chance of bleeding. They could be dangerous if you take aspirin or warfarin, which can also raise the chance of bleeding.

For safety, be sure to tell your doctor everything you take. And do not take any new medicine without talking to your doctor first.

What are some safety tips?

By working closely with your doctor and pharmacist, you can avoid the problems caused by taking a lot of medicines. To be successful:

Keep your doctor informed.

Make a list of everything you take. Include any herbs, vitamins, homeopathic remedies, supplements, and over-the-counter medicines like cold remedies or aspirin. 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.

Learn about your medicines.

Know your medicines by name, and understand what they do. Read all the information sheets that come with your medicines. You can find

books in the library or bookstores that list medicines, their side effects, and possible interactions.

Always talk to your doctor first.

Do not take any medicine, either prescription or over-the-counter, without talking to your doctor or pharmacist.

Use a drug interaction checker.

Ask your doctor or pharmacist to run your list 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.

Stick with one drugstore, if possible.

Before filling any new prescription, give the pharmacist your list of medicines. Ask about possible interactions with any other medicines you are taking. If you go to more than one drugstore, make sure each of them has your list.

Questions to ask your doctor

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

Questions about medicine safety: