

Prescription Drug Options for Older Adults: **Managing Your Medicines**



As people age, the likelihood of taking medicines increases; studies show that the more medicines people take, the more likely they are to be taking a medicine they may not need. It is, therefore, important to take an active role in understanding what is being prescribed for you. In order to better manage chronic conditions, reduce the chance of harmful drug interactions and get the best value for your money, keep in mind that you are part of a team—along with your doctors and other health care professionals—working to make good health care decisions. This brochure will assist you in managing your own medicines, getting the best value for your money, and finding help in making prescription drug choices.

Medicine Record

To start with, it is important that you keep good track of all the medicines you are taking; this will also help to reduce your risk of harmful drug interactions. Make your own list of medicines by keeping a medicine record. Update your medicine record whenever you start on a new medicine or when you are no longer taking a medicine. Include the following in your medicine record:



- Name of medicine
- What it is for
- Name of doctor who prescribed it
- How and when to take
- How much to take (dosage)
- Color/shape of medicine
- Any side effects or warnings

You can also take advantage of medication tracker software on your personal computer. See www.consumerreports.org/health/medication-tracker/index.htm for help organizing and tracking your medicines, as well as other information to share with your doctor.

Talking to Your Doctor

It is important to get into the habit of asking your doctor questions about your medicines each time you receive a new prescription. If you receive prescriptions from more than one doctor, always take your medicine record with you and let your doctor know which medicines you are currently taking.

Questions to Ask About Your Medicines:

- Why do I take this prescription? Is it for long- or short-term use?
- How do I take this medicine (how often, with/without food, etc.)?
- What are its side effects? What should I do if they occur?
- Can I substitute a non-drug alternative or a generic?
- Does it duplicate any of the other prescriptions I am taking?
- What should I do if I miss a dose?
- If I cut a pill in half, will it be ineffective?
- Does this drug interact with any of the other prescriptions I take?
- How important is this prescription given my finances and overall health?
- Does my health or age make this drug unsafe for me?



Don't Forget to Mention. . .

- Any over-the-counter (OTC) medicines you are currently taking such as pain relievers, antacids and laxatives; be sure to include any herbal, vitamin or dietary supplements as well.
- Any research you have done. Go to www.CRBestBuyDrugs.org to download simple reports featuring comparisons of drugs by medical condition or drug class.



Keeping Up with Your Medicines

- Keep medicines in plain sight in a cool, dry place like a kitchen counter or desktop.
- Do not keep your medicines in the refrigerator, unless told to do so by your doctor, pharmacist or the instructions on your medicine bottle.
- Do not keep your medicines in a bathroom where they can become damaged and less effective from shower steam or moisture.
- Set timers and reminders to take your medicines, if needed. Program clocks for when you are at home, and cell phones and watches when you are traveling.
- When flying, carry your medicines with you; do not pack them in your checked luggage. Check with the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) for the most current information about traveling with medicines at www.tsa.gov or 1.866.289.9673.
- Avoid having to make last minute refills. Mark your calendar in advance or look into a mail-order pharmacy, which can be less expensive.



The best way to keep up with your medicines is to keep your medicine record and bottles within easy reach.



Overcoming Some Medicine Hurdles

Sometimes people avoid taking prescribed medicines. If you are one of these people, ask yourself if any of the following apply to you:

I have trouble affording it — If a medicine is expensive, you may decide not to get the prescription filled. Talk to your doctor about the cost of a drug to see if there are less expensive generic medicines. For more information on controlling the costs of your prescription drugs, see the sections on *Getting the Best Value for your Medicines* and *Help Paying for Your Medicines*.

I don't feel any different when taking the drug, or, my symptoms have gone away — Sometimes it is hard to tell when a medicine is working; many medicines work as a “preventative” by preventing your symptoms or conditions from getting worse. Understanding which medicines work to prevent your symptoms from getting worse will help in following your drug routine.



My symptoms are worsening, or, I'm having side effects — Due to changes in your body as you age, prescriptions you have taken for years may begin to affect you differently; signs of memory loss, irritability or loss of coordination can be due to drug interactions rather than medical conditions. It is important to record any change in symptoms or side effects, and share this information in detail with your doctor immediately. This may

result in taking a lower dose, changing when you take the prescription, or taking a different medicine altogether.

My medicines are complicated to take — Especially when managing several medicines, it becomes more difficult to observe all of the rules required for each medicine. Getting organized with your medicine record is the easiest way to get into the habit of taking your medicines successfully.

The most important aspect of your drug routine is that it is manageable.



Getting the Best Value for Your Medicines

Review your needs every year

Evaluate your prescription drug plan and compare it with your needs every year. There can be major changes in the pharmaceutical and insurance industries each year that will affect what benefits are being offered and what drugs are covered (and at what prices).

Look into your medicine choices

Doctors do not know what prescriptions are covered by your insurance company. Ask your insurance company for a copy of your drug plan “formulary” (which is a list of all medicines covered by your insurance company) and bring it to your doctors’ appointments. Together, you can evaluate the choice of medicines that will be most effective.



Consider a generic

“Generics” are copies of brand-name medicines whose patents have expired (expirations occur after the drug has been on the market many years). Because a drug has been on the market for so long, it is proven. Generics are less expensive because the research has already been done and the drug has already been tested by the original manufacturer. Makers of generic drugs are not allowed to copy the exact look of the original brand-name drug so a generic drug may look different than the original brand-name medicine, but all generic drugs must maintain the same chemical make-up as the original.

Shop around

Consider all of your drug plan’s preferred pharmacies and compare prices. Ask about pharmacy discount cards and senior citizen discounts; ask your insurance company about online or mail-order pharmacies.

Help Paying for Your Medicines

After reviewing ways to save money on your medicines, you may find that you are still having trouble paying for them. Here are some websites that can provide additional assistance:

- **Medicare Extra Help Program** provides information about the Social Security assistance program and application process for the Medicare Part D Subsidy: www.ssa.gov/prescriptionhelp.
- **State Pharmaceutical Assistance Program (SPAP)** provides information about any available state-funded assistance programs for prescription drug costs: www.medicare.gov/spap.asp.
- **Pharmaceutical Assistance Program (PAP)** provides information about pharmaceutical companies that offer assistance programs for the drugs they manufacture: www.medicare.gov/pap.

Finding Answers

There are community experts who can help you evaluate your needs for the best prescription drug plan for you. Your local Area Agency on Aging (AAA) or State Health Insurance Assistance Program (SHIP) have trained staff and volunteers who can help you go through the step-by-step process of comparing and selecting the best prescription drug plan for your needs. To find a AAA or SHIP near you, call the Eldercare Locator at 1.800.677.1116 or visit the website at www.eldercare.gov.



Resources

By managing your prescriptions throughout the year, having regular discussions with your doctors and health care professionals, and understanding your own medicines and personal health needs, you can take a more active role in managing your medicines and make good decisions about your health now and in the future. For more information on taking an active role in your health care, see “Prescription Drug Options for Older Adults” at www.n4a.org/programs/best-buy-drugs, or contact the two key resources listed below.



Connecting You to Community Services

800.677.1116

www.eldercare.gov

The first step to finding resources for older adults in any U.S. community and a free national service of the U.S. Administration on Aging (AoA) that is administered by the National Association of Area Agencies on Aging (n4a).



www.CRBestBuyDrugs.org

Consumer Reports Best Buy Drugs™ (CRBBD) is a public education project of Consumers Union dedicated to publishing reports and information about the comparative effectiveness and cost of various prescription drugs and especially how a drug to treat a given illness or condition compares against other such medicines.



Advocacy. Action. Answers on Aging.