

healthsmart!

How to Avoid Medication Errors

Be an informed consumer

Patient safety is a top priority for all physicians, nurses, pharmacists and other health care workers. However, error is always a possibility, especially with medications. Medication errors can happen in hospitals, in pharmacies and even at home. The more information you have, the better you can take care of yourself and help prevent errors. Ask your pharmacists, doctors and nurses about your medications. And if you have a chronic illness, find out all you can about your illness and the medications you are taking. What you learn will help protect you. Your doctors, nurses and pharmacists work hard to keep you healthy, but you are also responsible. Learn what questions to ask.

Expect answers—it's your life and health!

General medication guidelines

Make a list of all the medications you take, including vitamins, herbals, nutritional supplements and over-the-counter products. Include:

- How much you take (dose) or the number of pills
- How often you take the medication
- Letters or numbers on the pills or capsules
- Name of the pharmacy
- Name of the doctor who prescribed the medicine
- Date you started taking the medicine and when your medication regimen was last changed
- List of your medication and food allergies

Any time your medications change, change your list, too.

Avoiding errors at home

- **Keep medications in their original containers.** Many pills look alike, so by keeping them in their original containers, you will know which is which and how to take them.
- **Read the label** every time you take a dose to make sure you have the right drug and you are following the right instructions. For instance, if the medication says take on an empty stomach, be sure to do so as foods can reduce the impact of the medication.
- **Turn on the lights** when you take your medication. If you can't see what you're taking, you may take the wrong medication.
- **Do not store medications in the bathroom or in direct sunlight.** Humidity, heat and light can affect the way medications work. Some medications require refrigeration; make sure you know if that is necessary.
- **Do not keep medications for people near medications for pets.** Mix-ups can be dangerous.
- **Do not keep tubes of ointments or creams next to your tube of toothpaste.** They feel a lot alike when you grab one quickly, but a mistake could be serious.
- **Flush old medications** down the toilet. Some drugs become toxic after the expiration date.
- **Do not chew, crush or break any capsules or tablets unless your doctor, pharmacist or nurse tells you to do so.** Some long-acting medications are absorbed too quickly when chewed and can make you sick; other medications won't be as effective if not taken whole.
- When taking liquid medications, **use only the cup or measuring device that came with the medication.** Dosing errors can happen if you use a different cup because the cups are often different sizes or have different markings. Household teaspoons and table spoons are not very accurate. Ask your pharmacist to give you a special spoon or oral syringe instead.

Avoiding errors at the pharmacy

- If you get prescriptions from multiple doctors or pharmacies, make sure all the doctors and pharmacies you visit know what you are getting from the others.
- When you start a new medication, ask about the risks or side effects. If you don't understand the information, ask your doctor, pharmacist or nurse to explain it again. Request written instructions.
- When given a new prescription, if you cannot read it, ask for a clearer copy.
- Whenever in doubt about a medication, ask a pharmacist, doctor or nurse.

Avoiding errors in the hospital

- Take your medications or the list of your medications with you when you go to the hospital. Your doctors, nurses and pharmacists will need to know what you are taking.
- Bring a list of medications that you cannot take (due to allergies or other reasons). Give the reasons why and show it to your doctors, nurses or pharmacists.
- After your doctor has seen them, send the medications home with your family. While you are in the hospital you may not need the same medications.
- Tell your doctors and nurses you want to know the names of your medications and the reasons you are taking them. That way, if anyone tells you anything different, you'll know to ask questions, which can help prevent errors.
- Look at all medicines before you take them. If it doesn't look like what you usually take, ask why. It may be a generic drug, or it may be the wrong drug.
- Request any written information that is available about your medications.
- Do not let anyone give you medication without checking your hospital ID bracelet every time. This helps ensure you are not given someone else's medication.
- Before any test or procedure, ask if it will require any dyes or medicines. Remind your nurse and doctor if you have allergies.

- When you're ready to go home, have a doctor, nurse or pharmacist go over the list of medications to take home with you and a family member. Ask what is different about this list from the list you had when you came in.
- If you're too ill to follow these instructions, ask a friend or relative to help.

UK HealthCare can help

Modern medications are increasingly complex and powerful. They have great healing power when used properly. Yet their ability to heal or harm depends largely on the quality of the medical and pharmaceutical care that guides their use. That's why every patient should work closely with their physicians, nurses and pharmacist to help make the best use of medications. By being an informed patient, you can decrease the chance of medication errors and adverse reactions.

UK HealthCare pharmacy information

- UK has several pharmacies on campus; the Kentucky Clinic pharmacy, two Markey Cancer Center pharmacies, the Kentucky Children's Hospital pharmacy and the UK student health pharmacy.
- More than 80 pharmacists and 80 pharmacy technicians serve inpatients and outpatients at UK HealthCare.
- UK School of Pharmacy is a leader in service, education and research and is ranked in the top 10 of all pharmacy schools in the country. For more information, go to www.mc.uky.edu/pharmacy.
- The Kentucky Clinic pharmacy has a Web site which can be accessed at www.hosp.uky.edu/pharmacy/outpatientpharmacy.html.
- An online resource for medication information is available for consumers at www.safemedication.com.

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Call UK Health Connection at (859) 257-1000 or toll free (800) 333-8874 to make an appointment or request a referral. Visit us online at ukhealthcare.uky.edu.

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