

Safe Medication Use in Older Adults: A Guide for Patients & Families

Older adults often take several medications for different medical conditions. When medications are used carefully, they can improve health and quality of life. However, medication mistakes, drug interactions, and side effects become more common as people age. A safe medication plan can help reduce confusion, falls, hospitalizations, and other serious problems.

Why Medication Safety Matters

- Older adults may process medications more slowly
- Taking many medications at once increases the risk of side effects and interactions
- Memory problems can lead to missed doses or accidental double-dosing
- Some medications can worsen confusion, dizziness, or fall risk

Common Medication Safety Risks

- Taking the wrong dose
- Taking a medication at the wrong time
- Taking duplicate medications
- Mixing prescription medicines with alcohol or over-the-counter products
- Stopping medications suddenly without medical advice
- Using expired medications

Tips for Safe Medication Use

Keep an Updated Medication List

- Include prescription medications, over-the-counter medicines, vitamins, and supplements
- Bring the list to every medical appointment
- Update the list whenever something changes

Use One Pharmacy When Possible

- A single pharmacy can help identify drug interactions and duplicate prescriptions

Use Medication Organizers

- Weekly pill boxes
- Blister packs prepared by the pharmacy
- Medication dispensers with alarms or locked compartments

Set Up Reminders

- Phone alarms
- Written schedules
- Caregiver reminders
- Medication charts kept in a visible place

Review Medications Regularly

- Ask the healthcare team to review all medications at least periodically
- Review medications after hospital stays or emergency visits
- Ask whether any medication can be reduced, simplified, or stopped

Watch for Side Effects

- Sleepiness or sedation
- Dizziness or falls
- New confusion or memory problems
- Constipation, nausea, or appetite changes
- Mood or behavior changes

Medication Categories That Often Need Extra Caution

- Benzodiazepines and other sedatives
- Opioid pain medications
- Sleep aids
- Anticholinergic medications
- Blood thinners
- Diabetes medications that may lower blood sugar
- Medications that affect blood pressure or balance

Warning Signs Caregivers Should Notice

- Medications running out too soon
- Pills left behind or missed doses
- New confusion, sleepiness, or agitation
- Falls or near-falls
- Multiple bottles of the same medication
- Difficulty understanding what each medication is for






Questions to Ask the Healthcare Team

- What is each medication for?
- What are the most important side effects to watch for?
- Are any of these medications no longer needed?
- Could any of these medications worsen memory, balance, or sleep?
- What should we do if a dose is missed?

How Families Can Help

- Attend appointments when possible
- Help organize pill boxes or blister packs
- Monitor refill patterns and adherence
- Keep medications stored safely and out of reach of children or vulnerable adults
- Encourage open communication about side effects or concerns

National Organizations & Resources

- ✓ National Institute on Aging
 nia.nih.gov
- ✓ U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA)
 fda.gov
- ✓ American Geriatrics Society
 americangeriatrics.org
- ✓ Eldercare Locator
 1-800-677-1116 |  eldercare.acl.gov

Final Notes

- Safe medication use is an important part of healthy aging.
- Simple systems can reduce medication mistakes and side effects.
- Families, caregivers, pharmacists, and healthcare providers all play a role in medication safety.