

Stop Medication Errors

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Living Well

A column from SVNA by Cyd Emmons

Every year more than 770,000 Americans are harmed due to medication errors and, according to the Institute of Medicine, at least 7,000 deaths annually are due to the misuse of prescription or over the counter (OTC) medicines. Nearly all could have been prevented.

Medication errors can happen in the hospital or at home and to anyone of any age, but seniors are the group most affected. Food and Drug Administration statistics show that nearly half of the fatalities due to medication errors are among those over age 60.

Many seniors are coping with more than one medical condition, each with its own set of remedies, only increasing the chances of misusing their prescriptions and OTC medications. Even if not fatal, the results can be serious. If medications are not taken correctly and regularly, the underlying condition is not being properly treated. Misuse of medications can produce effects that mimic Alzheimer's or other forms of dementia, making it difficult for physicians to pinpoint the real problem.

Common Sense Steps

Pat Tremblay, R.N., M.S., Executive Director of the Salisbury Visiting Nurse Association, says that keeping a few rules in mind can help make sure that your medications work for you and don't cause harm.

- Make a list of every medication you take regularly—prescription and OTC, not forgetting dietary supplements and herbal preparations—including the dose, date prescribed, how often you take them, and the name of the pharmacy. Make another list of food and drug allergies, including any drug groups to which you've had a bad reaction in the past. Give both lists to your doctor to review every time he or she writes you a new prescription.
- Before leaving the doctor's office, make sure you understand what any new prescription is for, how it should be taken, and any side effects you might experience. If you're having a regular prescription re-filled and the pills are a different shape, color or have a different imprint, ask the pharmacist about it before you take them. While it's possible that the manufacturer has made changes, you may have been inadvertently given the wrong medication or dose. Be an informed and assertive consumer. No medication question is too trivial to ask your doctor or pharmacist.
- Keep all medications in their original containers and check the label every time you take them. Turn on the lights if necessary and put on your glasses. If you can't see it you can't be sure that you're taking the right thing.
- Remove and discard the cotton from OTC medications when you open the bottle. The cotton can attract moisture or even play host to a fungus.

- Use a medicine box with compartments to help you keep track of your daily medications.
- If you're taking a liquid medication, use the cup or spoon that came with it to avoid dosing errors.
- Don't crush, chew or break any tablet or capsule unless you're instructed to do so.
- Take oral medications with cool water, never with carbonated or hot beverages or with grapefruit juice, all of which can interfere with proper absorption.
- Take the entire course of medication your doctor has prescribed, even if your symptoms have disappeared.

Protect The Earth

A quick survey of any home medicine cabinet would probably reveal ancient prescriptions and OTC remedies dating back to the 20th century. They've probably lost their potency and some can even turn toxic and all should be discarded. But, do not ever flush medications down the toilet or wash down the sink. Too many people have been doing this for too long, with the result that trace amounts of every sort of drug have been found in drinking water. Medications that find their way into the water supply harm fish and aquatic wildlife, not to mention septic systems and water treatment plants.

Mark Latham, an environmental analyst at the Connecticut Department of Environmental Protection (DEP), said that in this state, putting pharmaceuticals in the trash is the preferred method of disposal. Prescriptions should be kept in their original containers. To protect your privacy, remove the labels if possible or use a permanent marker or duct tape to cover it.

Modify the medications to render them unpalatable to humans and animals. Put a small amount of water in the vial with tablets or capsules to at least partially dissolve them. Add salt, flour or powdered spices such as mustard to liquid medications to make a mixture so foul that no person or animal would even think about ingesting it. Wrap meds in blister-packs in layers of duct or other opaque tape.

Tape the containers shut with packing or duct tape and place in larger opaque containers such as yogurt cups or margarine tubs. Do not put medicines in food, which might be consumed by animals.

For further information about preferred disposal methods and other environmental issues visit the DEP's website at ct.gov/dep (look under Pollution Prevention, Individuals/Families) or the Northeast Recycling Council at nerc.org