

Is This Really the Right Medicine? How You Can Prevent Medication Errors

Can you read your doctor's writing? Sometimes pharmacists can't either. With 80% of Americans taking one or more medicines daily, medication errors injure approximately 1.5 million Americans every year.

Even though new electronic prescribing systems produce readable prescriptions, these prescriptions can contain errors in patient name, medication name or strength and the directions for use.

Pharmacists are concerned about medication errors, and pharmacies have taken many steps to ensure that the right prescription is given to the right person. But no system is fail-proof. So you need to take an active role in making sure that you get the correct medicine each and every time you get a prescription.

Here are a few things we all can do to get the correct medication and instructions.

1. Keep an up-to-date list of all of your medications, including over-the-counter medications, vitamins and minerals, and dietary and herbal supplements.

Tell your doctors, dentists and pharmacists about ALL the medications you take. Many over-the-counter medicines and supplements can interact with prescription medications. Your doctor and pharmacist can check for drug interactions before you take a new medicine.

Carry a medication list to show to your health care professionals. Please refer to our JustAskBlue May 2010 news capsule on making a medication list by clicking here: http://www.justaskblue.com/archived_news.htm

2. Tell your doctors and pharmacists about your medication allergies and any bad reactions you have had to medicines.

It is important to tell them about your medication allergies or any bad reactions you have had to medicine. A medication allergy may cause a rash, hives, or more serious symptoms like anaphylaxis (trouble breathing, drop in blood pressure, shock, or loss of consciousness). Taking the same medicine, or even a similar medicine, can cause the symptoms to return.

3. Before you leave the doctor's office, ask if you were prescribed any new prescriptions.

Doctors often fax or e-mail prescriptions to pharmacies. Sometimes they forget to tell a patient that a prescription will be waiting at a pharmacy. So be sure to ask if any medicines have been prescribed for you.

If your doctor did prescribe a medication ask for the name, the directions, and reason for use in writing. You can then double-check this information with the medication you are picking up at the pharmacy to make sure the correct medicine is given to you.

4. Know what condition each medication treats.

A good way to make sure you are receiving the correct medicine from a pharmacy is to ask the pharmacist if the medicine is useful for the health problems you are experiencing. If the medicine doesn't treat the symptoms or health problem you have, ask the pharmacist to double-check the prescription with the doctor.

5. Give your pharmacist adequate time to fill or refill a medication.

Ever make a mistake when you're in a rush? Pharmacies can get busy. Waiting a few hours for a new prescription or calling for prescription refills a day or two early will allow the pharmacists extra time to make sure that your prescription is correctly dispensed.

6. Ask your pharmacist to go over the medication and how to use it.

When you pick up your prescription, be sure to ask the pharmacist to explain what the medication is for, how to use it, and what to expect. This creates one more opportunity for the pharmacist to check the prescription and will give you a chance to make sure that the medicine makes sense given your symptoms and health condition.

7. Know what your medications look like, and double check your medications before leaving the pharmacy.

Being able to identify your medications can help you detect an error before leaving the pharmacy. Look at the prescription vial and the medicine inside it to make sure that it looks like the same pill you picked up in the past. (It's really ok to open up that stapled prescription bag!) Changes in the look of the medicine may be due to changes in manufacturer, but be sure to ask the pharmacist to double-check the medicine if you do not recognize it.

8. Join a pharmacy refill program.

If you have refills on your prescriptions, it is highly recommended that you enroll into a refill program. Through a refill program your prescription is automatically prepared a couple of days before you run out of your medicines. This process allows pharmacies to refill your medication at a slow time of day, when there is more time to check your medication for mistakes. It also gives pharmacies time to order your medication if it is out of stock or call your doctor if a new prescription is needed.

Medication errors happen often. Protect yourself; be on the lookout for errors before you leave the pharmacy.

- Always ask your pharmacist to explain your medications to you.
- Check your medications and make sure that the medication and directions are the same as what your doctor told you.
- Ask your pharmacist to double check the prescription and medication if it looks different than what you have been getting in the past.
- Call your pharmacy right away if you get home and realize that you picked up the wrong medicine or have wrong directions. Do not take a medicine that you suspect may be the wrong medicine. Pharmacies will replace a wrongly dispensed prescription for free if you bring back the medicine.

Remember, pharmacists are concerned about your well-being and want to prevent medication errors. By making sure you know what medicine has been prescribed by your doctor, checking your prescription vials at the pharmacy, and asking pharmacists to review your medications, you can be an active partner in medication error prevention.