

5 Medication Safety Tips for Older Adults

Whether you're settling into your 60s or heading into your 90s, be careful when taking medicines, herbal preparations and supplements.

Why the special concern? The older we get, the more likely we are to use more prescription and nonprescription (or over-the-counter, OTC) medicines. That can increase the chance of harmful side effects and drug interactions.

As we age, physical changes can affect the way our body handles medications and how medicines work in our bodies, which can lead to potential complications. For example, your liver and kidneys may not work as well as they once did, which affects how a drug breaks down and leaves your body.

If you have questions about any medication, contact the U.S. Food and Drug Administration's Division of Drug Information at 1-855-543-3784 and 1-301-796-3400, or druginfo@fda.hhs.gov. Our [pharmacists](#) are experts at interpreting information for patients.

Even if your medications have worked well for you over the years, they might need to be adjusted or changed [later in life](#). Here are some important safety tips to keep in mind:

1. Take Medicine as Prescribed and with Input from Your Health Care Professional

Take your medicine regularly and follow your health care professional's instructions. If you're having bothersome side effects or have other questions about your medication, talk to a health care professional.

Don't take prescription medication your health care professional has not prescribed for you. Doctors consider many factors, including allergies and drug interactions, before prescribing medication for someone.

Taking someone else's prescription medication can cause unexpected side effects or dangerous reactions. For example:

- If you have a symptom such as pain, your medical problem could get worse.
- Misuse of medications may lead to addiction.

Don't skip doses or stop taking a prescribed medication without first consulting your health care professional, even if you're feeling better or think the medicine isn't working. Not taking your medicine as prescribed could lead to your disease getting worse, hospitalization or even death.

For example, many antibiotics must be taken for the full length of time prescribed even after your symptoms go away. Otherwise, you risk the infection returning and in a more severe form.

The best medicine in the world won't work unless you take it correctly. For example, medicines that treat chronic conditions such as high blood pressure, high cholesterol and diabetes work only when taken regularly and as directed. These diseases can cause damage to your body that is hard to notice before something is wrong.

Dosing for medications is based on [clinical trials](#). Every medicine is different and is dosed according to what's been tested. That's one reason you shouldn't select or change a dose yourself.

If you are having trouble remembering how and when to take your medicine, talk with your pharmacist or other professional. They may have

suggestions and tools to help you take the right medicine, at the right dose and at the right time.

2. Store your Medicines Properly and Check the Expiration Date

Help make sure your medicines remain safe and effective by storing them properly. Medicines that aren't stored properly may not work as well or may cause harm, even if they are not expired.

Be sure to read the information you were provided to find specific storage instructions for your medicine. Most medicines are best stored up and away, in a cool, dry place. Avoid exposing medicines to extreme high or low temperatures. For example, don't leave them in the car in the summer or winter. Some medicines must be stored in the refrigerator.

Take care to keep all medicines up and away from children. Children are especially at risk of accidental poisoning and may take a medicine because it looks like candy. If you have questions about how to safely store your medicines, contact your pharmacist or health care professional.

There are potential harms from taking expired medicines or drugs stored in extreme temperatures. If medicine has degraded, weakened or worsened over time, it might not work as intended. Worse, it could become harmful and cause unwanted side effects. People with serious or life-threatening diseases may be at higher risk of potential harm from expired medicines.

Check the expiration dates on your medication and [discard any unused or expired medicines](#) as soon as possible.

3. Be Aware of Potential Medication Interactions and Side Effects

Even common foods and drinks can cause serious interactions with medications. One example is [grapefruit juice](#), which can affect how well some medicines work and may cause dangerous side effects.

Some medications should not be taken with alcohol, because it can result in loss of coordination, memory problems, sleepiness and falls.

Interactions can occur when:

- Your medical condition makes a medication potentially harmful.
- One of your medications affects the way your other medicine works, causing dangerous side effects.
- An herbal preparation or supplement alters the way another medication works.
- A food or drink (with or without alcohol) reacts with your medication or changes the way your body absorbs your medicine.

Learn about possible interactions and side effects of your medications by reading drug labels on your medicine. Also review any special instructions from your health care professional.

Some medications can cause side effects that mimic other health problems, such as memory difficulties, dizziness and sleepiness. Ask your health care professional if any new problems you are experiencing could be caused by your medications.

4. Keep a Medication List

Write down all medicines you take, including OTC drugs, vitamins and dietary supplements. [The list should include](#) the name of each medicine or supplement, the amount you take, and when you take it. If it's a prescription drug, note who prescribed it and why.

[Keep the list current](#) and show it to all your health care providers, including physical therapists and dentists. Keep one copy at home and another with you (in your wallet, purse or cellphone).

5. Have a Question? Contact FDA's Drug Information Pharmacists.

When in doubt, reach out and ask our pharmacists.

- By email: druginfo@fda.hhs.gov
- By phone: 1-855-543-3784 and 1-301-796-3400