

Tips to Help Prevent Medical Errors

A Patient Fact Sheet Medication Precautions

- **Make sure that all of your doctors know about everything you are taking.** This includes prescription and over-the-counter medicines, and dietary supplements such as vitamins and herbs. At least once a year, bring all of your medicines and supplements with you to your doctor. Brown-bagging your medicines can help you and your doctor talk about them and find out if there are any problems. It also can help your doctor keep your records up to date, which can help you get better-quality care.
- **Make sure your doctor knows about any allergies and adverse reactions you have had to medicines.** This can help you avoid getting a medicine that can harm you. List all medicines you are currently taking, including any herbal supplements and vitamins/minerals. Herbal supplements may interact with prescription medications.
- **When your doctor writes you a prescription, make sure you can read it.** If you can't read your doctor's handwriting, your pharmacist might not be able to, either.
- **Ask for information about your medicines in terms you can understand — both when your medicines are prescribed and when you receive them.**
 - What is the medicine for?
 - How am I supposed to take it, and for how long?
 - What side effects are likely?
 - What do I do if they occur?
 - Is this medicine safe to take with other medicines or dietary supplements I am taking?
 - What food, drink, or activities should I avoid while taking this medicine?
- **When you pick up your medicine from the pharmacy, ask: “Is this the medicine that my doctor prescribed?”** A study by the Massachusetts College of Pharmacy and Allied Health Sciences found that 88% of medicine errors involved the wrong drug or the wrong dose.
- **If you have any questions about the directions on your medicine labels, ask.** Medicine labels can be hard to understand. For example, ask if “four doses daily” means taking a dose every six hours around the clock or just during regular waking hours.
- **Ask your pharmacist for the best device to measure your liquid medicine.** Also, ask questions if you're not sure how to use it. Research shows that many people do not understand the right way to measure liquid medicines. For example, many use household teaspoons, which often do not hold a true teaspoon of liquid. Special devices, like marked syringes, help people to measure the right dose. Being told how to use the devices helps even more.
- **Ask for written information about the side effects your medicine could cause.** If you know what might happen, you will be better prepared if it does, or if something unexpected happens instead. That way, you can report the problem right away and get help before it gets worse. A study found that written information about medicines could help patients recognize problem side effects and then give that information to their doctor or pharmacist.
- **Here are some other steps you can take:**
 - Speak up if you have questions or concerns. You have a right to question anyone who is involved with your care.
 - Make sure that someone, such as your personal doctor, is in charge of your care. This is especially important if you have many health problems or are in a hospital.
 - Make sure that all health professionals involved in your care have important health information about you. Do not assume that everyone knows everything he or she needs to.
 - Ask a family member or friend to be there with you and to be your advocate (someone who can help get things done and speak up for you if you can't). Even if you think you don't need help now, you might need it later.
 - Know that more is not always better. It is a good idea to find out why a test or treatment is needed and how it can help you. You could be better off without it.
 - If you have a test, don't assume that no news is good news. Ask about results.
 - Learn about your condition and treatments by asking your doctor and nurse and by using other reliable sources. For example, treatment recommendations based on the latest scientific evidence are available from the National Guideline Clearinghouse at www.guideline.gov. Ask your doctor if your treatment is based on the latest evidence.

Source for both charts: Susan B. Allen Memorial Hospital, El Dorado, KS.