



ElderCare Q&A

Managing Your Medications

Q: How can I keep all my medications straight?

A: It's not unusual for some older people to be taking as many as half a dozen medications or more. Studies show that the more medications people take, the more likely they are to be taking a medication they may not need. As consumers, it's important for us all to understand what drugs we are taking, and why we are taking each one. To reduce the chance of a harmful interaction between drugs, here are some tips for managing your medications:

Medicine Record: Start by creating a written list of all the meds you are using. Update this list whenever your medications --- or your dosages --- change. List out the name of each drug, what it's for, the name of the doctor who prescribed it, any instructions about how and when to take it, the dosage you take, the color and shape of the drug, and any side effects listed for the drug. If you can't type it up, have someone type it up for you. Keep a copy in your wallet, and be sure to give it to any doctor or specialist you see. Also list any vitamins or dietary supplements you take, and any other over-the-counter drugs, like pain relievers.

Talk To Your Doctor: Whenever your doctor prescribes a new medication, be sure to ask why you are taking this medication? Is it for short or long-term use? What should you do if you miss a dose? Will this drug interact in any way with my other drugs? Am I supposed to take this drug with or without food?

Handling Your Drugs: Keep your medications in a cool, dry place, and in plain sight, like a kitchen counter, or bureau. Don't store your meds in a bathroom. Steam in a shower or moisture can damage the effectiveness of some medications. To avoid having to make last minute refills, watch the level of pills left in your bottle. Whenever you travel, take an extra week of medications with you, in case you get delayed on the other end of your trip. Have at least two pill boxes for this purpose.

Watch Side Effects: As you age, there are changes in your body that could cause certain drugs that you have taken for years to affect you differently. Watch for signs of memory loss, irritability, loss of coordination: these issues could be caused by drug interactions rather than any medical condition. Make a note of these changes, then call your doctor to set up a time to go over these medications. This might lead to a change in when you take a drug, changing the dose, or switching off a drug. For example, high blood pressure medications might require changes over time until the doctor feels like the combination is right.

Being Cost-Effective: Ask your insurance company for their list of covered drugs, called a "formulary." Whenever your doctor prescribes a new drug, check to see if it is in your formulary. If it's not on your formulary, ask your doctor to work with you to find a medicine that is on your insurance's formulary. Ask your doctor if this new drug is a brand name drug. If it is, ask if a cheaper generic version would make sense for you. If you are using an area pharmacy, ask for their drug discount card. Consider switching to a mail-order pharmacy which can be cheaper.

Financial Aid: To find out if you are eligible for financial assistance from the Massachusetts Prescription Advantage Program, call 1-800-AGE INFO and press "2". You can also call the same number and press "3" for free health insurance counseling advice on your Medicare Part D drug plan. You can also ask them about Medicare's "Extra Help" program. If you have limited income and resources, you may be able to get help paying for your monthly premiums, annual deductibles and prescription co-payments under the Medicare Part D prescription drug program. To qualify for Extra Help with Medicare prescription drug plan costs, your annual income must be limited to \$16,245 for an individual (\$21,855 for a married couple living together). To get the Extra Help, your total resources must be limited to \$12,510 for an individual (\$25,010 for a married couple living together). For more details on getting "Extra Help," go to <http://www.ssa.gov/pubs/10115.html/#what>.

Staying on top of your medication management is just one more way to protect your health today, and in the future.