

MANAGING MEDICATIONS

By Veronica Esquibel, pharmacist, Anticoagulation Clinic at Overlake Outpatient Center

Taking medications is a common part of managing an illness or disease, relieving pain or reducing a fever. As we age, this can become even more of a common occurrence. Older adults often manage multiple diseases with multiple daily medications. But some medications have serious health consequences when combined with others—even if they’re over-the-counter preparations. That’s why it’s important to avoid any dangerous drug interactions and work with your physician to manage your medications effectively.

The first step to managing medications is to take an active role in your health care. Be informed and talk regularly with health-care providers about any and all medications, including over-the-counter drugs and herbal supplements. Before taking any new medication, always consult your physician or

pharmacist. Over-the-counter drugs often contain the same active ingredients found in prescription medications and when taken together, can deliver an excessively high dose of medicine that may cause serious side effects. Also, other drug interactions may cancel each other out, reducing the efficiency of one or both.

Although it sounds easy enough to remember all the medications you’re taking and why, it is a challenge for many patients, especially those taking four or more prescriptions per day. In working with patients at the clinic to help reconcile their medications, we often find potentially dangerous duplications that must be addressed.

It’s absolutely essential to keep an up-to-date, accurate list of all the medications and dosages you’re taking. Make sure to include aspirin, acetaminophen (Tylenol), antacids, laxatives, cold medicines and herbal supplements. Keep this list with you at all times and give it to your physician at each appointment. There are many tracking tools available online—including one available for download at www.overlakehospital.org/resources—that can help you organize your list.

Here are some important tips to help promote medication safety and effectiveness:

- Keep an updated list of all your medications with you at all times.
- Understand the reason, frequency, dosage and side effects of each medication.
- Use a pill box with compartments for each day of the week to help you remember when to take your medication.
- When taking a new medication, make note of any side effects or any health issues outside the norm—nausea, fatigue, shortness of breath—and let your doctor know immediately.
- Take prescription medications at the same time each day.
- Maintain consistency in diet, exercise and other lifestyle factors whenever possible.
- Find a pharmacy you like, whether it’s near your home, work place or physician’s office,

and use it consistently for all medications. With your complete file, your pharmacist can look for drug interactions or allergies.

- Ask a friend or relative to keep a copy of your medication list in case of emergency.
- Take your medication list with you to each doctor appointment and notify your doctor if the list changes.
- Talk to your physician about nondrug options, such as exercise or diet changes that might provide relief for your condition.
- Ask your doctor about new medications. Advances in pharmaceuticals enable new medications to be developed, often with reduced side effects.

One of the more common drugs taken by older adults is a blood thinning medication called warfarin. Patients with heart disease, vascular disease or those vulnerable to stroke often take these to prevent clot formation. Because of the widespread use of these medications, anticoagulation clinics were established to help patients manage their medications and monitor their health. With the frequency of monitoring needed, it can be difficult for a primary-care physician to keep up. A quick finger-stick test can provide results in seconds, without the typical 24-hour turnaround time for lab processing. On-site pharmacists work with patients to ensure all other medications and lifestyle factors don’t interfere with a medication’s effectiveness.

Advances in medicine can mean living longer and enjoying a better quality of life than earlier generations. It may also mean we rely on more medications to manage our health either temporarily or long-term. When medications are needed, we can reduce potentially harmful drug interactions by taking responsibility for our care, maintaining an ongoing dialogue with our physicians and pharmacists, and organizing a personal medication record.

Helpful Web sites:
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www.nih.gov



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