

Your Medicine: Play It Safe

You can learn more about how to take medicines safely by reading this guide. It answers common questions about getting and taking medicines and has many handy forms that will help you keep track of information. Keep this guide with your medicines in case you have any questions, concerns, or worries.

This guide was developed by the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality (AHRQ) and the National Council on Patient Information and Education (NCPIE). Select to download the print version ([PDF file](#), 143 KB). [PDF Help](#).

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Medicine and You

Have you ever had a problem with your medicines? You are not alone. There are so many things to keep track of. For example, you may have asked yourself:

- When exactly should I take my medicine?
- Is it safe to take my vitamins when I am taking a prescription medicine?
- Now that I feel better, can I stop taking my medicine?

Let's face it. Medicine is prescribed to help you. But it can hurt you if you take too much or mix medicines that don't go together. Many people are harmed each year, some seriously, because of taking the wrong medicine or not taking the right medicines correctly.

Your Health Care Team

You can help get the best results by being a partner with your health care team. Your health care team includes:

- **Doctors, physician assistants, nurse practitioners, or other professionals** who prescribe your medicine for you or are in charge of your care.
- **Nurses** who help with your care at home, a doctor's office, or a hospital.
- **Pharmacists** who fill your prescription and are available to answer questions about your medicines.

Doctors and Pharmacies

Select to download the print version ([PDF file](#), 10 KB). [PDF Help](#).

Doctor:

Phone:

Doctor:

Phone:

Doctor:

Phone:

Nurse:

Phone:

Pharmacist:

Phone:

24-hour Pharmacy:

Phone:

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Four Ways To Play It Safe With Medicines

1. Give Your Health Care Team Important Information

Be a partner with your health care team. Tell them about:

- All the medicines, vitamins, herbals, and dietary supplements you're already taking. This includes:
 - **Prescription medicines.**
 - **Medicines you can buy without a prescription**, such as aspirin, antacids, laxatives, and cough medicine.
 - **Vitamins and dietary supplements**, such as St. John's Wort or ginkgo biloba.

List them all on the [Medicine Record Form](#) ([PDF file](#), 38 KB; [PDF Help](#)).

Also be sure to tell your health care team:

- If you have medicine allergies or if you have had problems when taking a medicine before.
- About any other doctors or health care professionals who have prescribed medicine for you or suggested that you take a vitamin or herbal supplement.
- If you are pregnant, may get pregnant, or are nursing a baby.
- About any other illness or medical condition you have, like diabetes or high blood pressure.
- If cost is a concern, there may be another medicine that costs less and will work the same.



I go to my regular doctor for most things, but sometimes I go to a specialist. No matter who I'm going to see, I always take my list of medicines with me and show it to the doctor.

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2. Get the Facts About Your Medicine

Be Informed

Ask questions about every new prescription medicine. Get the answers you need from your health care team before you take your medicine.

Read the Prescription

If your doctor writes your prescription by hand, make sure you can read it. If you can't read your doctor's handwriting, your pharmacist might not be able to either. If your doctor submits your prescription to the pharmacy electronically, ask for a copy of the prescription.

Know What Your Medicine Is For

Ask your doctor to write down on the prescription what the medicine is used for...not just "take once a day" but "take once a day for high blood pressure."

Ask Questions

If you have other questions or concerns:

- Talk to your doctor or pharmacist.
- Write questions down ahead of time and bring them to your appointment.

By taking the time to ask questions now, you may be preventing problems later.

Questions To Ask Before Taking Your Medicine

Select for a list of [Questions To Ask Before Taking Medicine](#) (PDF file, 14 KB).

Tips!

- **Write your questions down** ahead of time. Keep a list of questions you want to ask your health care team. Take the list with you to your appointment.
- **Take notes** when you get information from your health care team.
- **Bring a friend or family member** with you when you visit the doctor. Talking over what to do with someone you trust can help you make better decisions.
- **Try to use the same pharmacy** to buy all of your medicines so your prescription records will all be in one place.
- **Read and save the patient information** that comes with your medicine. It's often stapled to the bag from the pharmacy.
- **Keep a list of all the medicines, vitamins, and dietary supplements you take.** Be sure to add new medicines to the list when you start taking something new or when you change your dose. Show the list to your doctor and pharmacist. Use the [Medicine Record Form](#) (PDF file, 38 KB; [PDF Help](#)).
- **Make a copy of your list.** Keep one copy and give the other to a friend or loved one.

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3. Stay With Your Treatment Plan



I want to make sure all my medicines are OK. So once a year I call my pharmacist and make an appointment for her to check everything I'm taking. I put all my medicines and vitamins in a bag. I even put in nonprescription medicines like antacids, pain relievers, and laxatives.

Now that you have the right medicine, you'll want to carry out the treatment plan. But that's not always easy. The medicines may cause side effects. Or you may feel better and want to stop before finishing your medicines.

- **Take all the antibiotics** you were prescribed. If you are taking an antibiotic to fight an infection, it is very important to take all of your medicine for as many days as your doctor prescribed, even if you feel better.
- **Ask your doctor if your prescription needs to be refilled.** If you are taking medicine for high blood pressure or to lower your cholesterol, you may be using your medicine for a long time.
- If you are having **side effects** or other concerns, tell your doctor. You may be able to take a different amount or type of medicine.
- Your medicine was prescribed only for you. **Never give your prescription medicine to somebody else** or take prescription medicine that wasn't prescribed for you, even if you have the same medical condition.
- Ask whether you need blood tests, x-rays, or other **lab tests** to find out if the medicine is working, to find out if it's causing any problems, and to see if you need a different medicine. Ask your doctor to tell you what the tests showed.

What Products Can Help Me Keep Track of My Medicines?

Many products can help remind you to take your medicine on time and keep track of the doses you take. There are containers you can fill with your pills for each day of the week, calendars to check off, and even products that fit on top of a pill bottle. Ask your pharmacist for help finding the right product for you.

Tips!

You can get help:

- At work, there may be a nurse on site.
- At school, a school nurse may be able to help your child take medicines on time and safely.
- At home, a visiting nurse may be able to help you.

Friends and Family

Friends and family can help by:

- Going with you to the doctor. Ask them to take notes about your medicines and other parts of your treatment plan.
- Picking up your medicine at the pharmacy. Have them show the pharmacist your list of medicines, vitamins, and supplements. They should ask, "Will this new medicine work safely with the other medicines?"
- Calling regularly to remind you to take your medicine on time. If you are having any problems, let them know.
- Keeping a record of what medicine you take so you won't take it twice.

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4. Keep a Record of Your Medicines

Use the [Medicine Record Form](#) ([PDF file](#), 38 KB; [PDF Help](#)) to help you keep track of your medicines, vitamins, and other dietary supplements.



What Is a Generic Medicine?

Generic drugs are safe, effective, and approved by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA). They have the same dosage, safety, quality, performance, and strength as the brand-name drug. The color or flavor of a generic medicine may be different from the brand-name drug, but the active ingredient is the same.

After the patent runs out on a brand-name drug, companies can apply to the FDA to make a generic copy of that drug. Generic drugs usually cost less than brand-name drugs because their manufacturers didn't pay for the development costs of the medicine.

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For More Information

To learn about specific medicines, go to www.medlineplus.gov and select "Drug Information." If you do not have Internet access, ask your local librarian for help. The Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality (AHRQ) has booklets about preventing, diagnosing, and treating common health conditions. Select for a [list of topics](#).

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Visit its Web sites:

www.talkaboutrx.org

www.bemedwise.org

Or contact NCPIE at:

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