We're all used to getting a prescription from the doctor when we're not well. It's a fact of life that, as we get older, we are more likely to need medicines prescribed by the doctor.

Most of the advice given in this leaflet applies to people of all ages. However, there are several reasons why senior citizens should take extra care with medicines. For example, as we become older, we will probably need smaller doses of medicine. One reason for this is that our liver and kidneys become less efficient at removing medicines, so that some medicines stay active in the body for longer. Don't worry about this - it's quite normal. It just means that you should be very careful not to take more of a medicine than your doctor tells you to. This leaflet explains how to use your medicines safely and effectively.

**Obtaining medicines**

Once you reach 60 years of age, you don't have to pay for prescription medicines. Just fill in and sign the form on the back of the prescription that says that you are exempt from prescription charges. If you find filling the form in difficult, ask a friend or relative to help you. You may be exempt from prescription charges, whatever your age, if you receive treatment for certain long-term conditions, such as diabetes. Ask your pharmacist for advice.

If you haven't reached retirement age yet and have to pay for your prescription, you might find it cheaper to buy a **pre-payment certificate** (application forms are available from most pharmacies) which covers all your prescription charges for varying periods of time.

When you receive a prescription, you should collect your medicines as soon as possible. If you can't get to a pharmacy, it is worth asking if your pharmacist can deliver them for you. Some local voluntary agencies may also be able to collect your medicines for you.
Buying medicines over the counter

It's important to check that any medicines you buy from your pharmacist don't contain ingredients that you are already taking. To do this, always check with your pharmacist that it's safe to take your prescribed medicines with the medicines you're thinking of buying. For example, a medicine that your doctor has prescribed and one that you buy over the counter may both contain paracetamol. In this way, you could take more than the recommended daily dose of paracetamol without realising it.

If you do buy a medicine over the counter, it's a good idea to ask the pharmacist to check that your prescription medicines won't 'interfere' with the medicines you intend to buy.

Many pharmacists now keep records of medicines that are sold as well as dispensed to patients. This helps to make sure that the best possible advice is given.

Medicine names

Most medicines have two names. These are the trade name (or brand name) and the approved name (or ingredient name). The trade name is the one given to a medicine by its manufacturer. For example, imagine a fictional brand of coffee called 'Blue Valley'. Here, 'Blue Valley' is the trade name while 'coffee' is the approved name - the trade name is designed to be 'catchy' and easy to remember.

With most medicines, it doesn't matter what particular brand (trade name) you use. With some medicines though, you need to keep to the same brand. This depends on a number of things - what your illness is, the range of medicines available, and your particular needs. Ask your doctor if you need to stick to the same brand. If you do, remember to tell your pharmacist.
Getting the best from your medicines

- Always read the label on your medicines. If the instructions are not clear, ask your pharmacist or doctor to explain them. Ask your doctor to write the full instructions on your prescription, and not just ‘as directed’ as this can be confusing.

- Don’t throw away the packaging from your medicines until you’ve finished taking them. It might contain helpful information.

- Always drink plenty of cool liquid with tablets and capsules - a full glass of water is ideal.

- If you find tablets difficult to swallow, ask your pharmacist or doctor if your medicine comes in a tablet that can be dissolved in water, or in a liquid form.

- If the instructions on the label tell you to take the medicine on an empty stomach, this means that you should try to take the medicine at least an hour before, or two hours after, your meal.

- Most tablet bottles have child-resistant caps, which can be very difficult to open, especially if you suffer from arthritis or can’t get a strong grip on the container. You can ask your pharmacist for ordinary screw tops when handing in your prescription. Pharmacists may also be able to provide large print and a few can also provide Braille labels.
Remembering to take your medicines

Everyone finds it difficult to remember to take medicines. There are a few things you can do to make it easier. The main thing is to work out what times suit you best. Meal times are often a good time to take medicines because you’re likely to have a drink with your meal.

Some people find it helpful to write down the times on a calendar and tick them off each time they take a dose.

Another way of remembering is to use a memory aid container, also known as a pill counter. These are containers with little compartments in them that help remind you when to take your medicines. If you think that something like this might help you, ask your pharmacist to show you the different types available and how they work. You usually have to buy these memory aids yourself but you might find it’s worth it if you’re having problems remembering to take your medicines.

There are many different types of memory aid containers. Some open and close more easily than others, which can be important for someone with arthritis. Take your time choosing the best one for you. If you cannot arrange your medicines into a memory aid, then your pharmacist or a friend may be able to help.

Some people also find it useful to draw up their own chart to help them remember to take their medicines. You could design your own headings, and they could be things like ‘What time do I need to take my medicine?’, and ‘Do I need to take my medicine on an empty stomach?’ You could have as many headings as you like, depending on the kind of things that you need to remind yourself of. Remember though that you must update your chart if you ever change your medicines, and that you may need different instructions for different medicines. You could ask your pharmacist for advice.
Safe-keeping

Never share or give your medicines to anyone else. They have been prescribed for you and may be harmful to other people.

Never keep your medicines where children can reach them. Ideally medicines should be kept in a locked cupboard. If this isn’t possible, make sure all your medicine containers are securely closed.

Expiry dates

Like foods, all medicines have a limited shelf-life. So it is best to get them in small quantities and to make sure you don’t use them after the ‘use-by’ date. There may be a date stamped on the container, or the letters EXP followed by a date. For example, EXP 1/12/03 would mean ‘do not use after 1st December 2003’. If you can’t find a date on the medicine container, as a general rule you shouldn’t keep tablets or capsules for longer than a year. Liquids should only be kept for six months. If in doubt, check the ‘use by’ date with your pharmacist.

Some medicines ‘go off’ very quickly once they’re opened. The label will tell you not to use them after a specified amount of time.

Medicines will last longer if they are kept cool and dry. When choosing a place to store your medicines, try to avoid hot and steamy places like the bathroom or kitchen. Don’t worry too much if the best place to store medicines is in the bathroom - but remember that steamy and warm conditions will reduce the shelf-life.

The best way to avoid taking ‘out of date’ medicines is to make sure you return them to your pharmacist once you’ve finished with them - don’t hold on to them for a ‘rainy day’.
Reducing side-effects

There is no such thing as a medicine without any possible side-effects. Sometimes it might be worth putting up with some mild side-effects if it means that your infection or illness gets better. And, of course, some people may never experience side-effects at all.

Stomach upsets are a common side-effect. You can reduce the risk of getting a stomach upset by taking your medicine while you’re eating, or just after a meal. If you’re not going to eat a main meal, take them with a snack or milky drink. However, some medicines work better when taken on an empty stomach, say one hour before eating. If this is the case, the directions on the label will usually tell you to take ‘before food’.

If you think that you are experiencing side-effects you should mention it to your doctor even if it seems trivial. It is easy to forget to ask the doctor about things like this, so it may help to write down the questions you want to ask before you go, to act as a reminder during your consultation.

If you do suffer from side-effects, the amount of medicine that you’re taking might need adjusting, or your doctor might want you to try a slightly different medicine that is less likely to cause side-effects.

Alcoholic drink should not be taken with some types of medicine. Ask your pharmacist or doctor for advice on whether you can drink alcohol while on your medication.

If you do experience symptoms that you think might be side-effects from your medicines, get in touch with your doctor or pharmacist immediately.