Managing Your Medicines

Taking medication safely

Advice for older people

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Managing Your Medicines was written in association with Dr Peter Rivers of the Pharmacy Academic Practice Unit at the University of Derby. It is endorsed by the Primary and Community Care Pharmacy Network (PCCPN). This edition of the leaflet was updated by Dr Rivers and members of the PCCPN National Committee.

If you would like this leaflet in another format, such as large print or audio tape, please contact the Information Resources Team on 020 7278 1114.
It’s a fact of life that, as we get older, we are more likely to need medicines prescribed by the doctor. Often they are prescribed to make sure that we don’t get ill. Sometimes we may need to take them for the rest of our lives. Most of the advice given in this leaflet applies to people of all ages. However, older people need to take extra care. For example, as we become older, we will probably need smaller doses of medicines. This is because our liver and kidneys become less efficient at removing medicines, so that some medicines stay active in the body for longer. This is quite normal. It just means that you must be very careful not to take more of a medicine than your doctor tells you to. This leaflet explains how to use medicines safely and effectively.

**Getting medicines on prescription**

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

If you’re under 60 and have to pay for your prescription, you might find it cheaper to buy a prescription **pre-payment certificate**, to cover all your prescription charges over a period. Application forms are available from most pharmacies or from your doctor. You can also apply for a prescription pre-payment certificate online at: [www.ppa.org.uk/ppa/ppc_faq.htm](http://www.ppa.org.uk/ppa/ppc_faq.htm)

When you receive a prescription, you should collect your medicines as soon as possible. Some pharmacists and doctors offer services to make collecting your prescriptions easier:
Some pharmacies will collect your prescription from your doctor’s surgery so it is ready to pick up from the pharmacy of your choice. Ask your pharmacy if it offers this service.

If you are unable to leave your home it is worth asking if your pharmacist can deliver your prescription to you at home. Check whether or not there will be a charge for this.

Some local voluntary agencies may also be able to collect your medicines for you.

If your medicines have stayed the same for a long time, you could use a repeat dispensing service. This means that you don’t have to go to the surgery every time you need more medicines, you just have to go to the pharmacy. Ask your doctor for more information.

Buying medicines

It is important to check that any medicines and herbal medicines you buy are safe to take together and with any prescribed medicines you’re taking. This is because different medicines and remedies may contain the same ingredients. For example, a prescribed medicine and one that you buy may both contain paracetamol. In this way, you could take more than the recommended daily dose of paracetamol without realising it.

You should also check that any medicines and herbal medicines you buy won’t interfere with your prescribed medicines. Some medicines can interact with each other, which could stop them from working properly or all together. This could make you ill. **Always check with your pharmacist that any medicines and herbal medicines you buy are safe to take with your prescribed medicines.**
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.

It is not advisable to buy medicines from unregulated websites. The medicines may not be safe to use and could react badly with other medicines you are taking.

If you want to buy medicines over the internet, buy from a UK website run by a legitimate pharmacy. To check this, find the name and address of the pharmacy running the website and check that it is registered with the Royal Pharmaceutical Society of Great Britain (RPSGB). Avoid websites that supply prescription-only medicines without a prescription. To check whether a pharmacist or pharmacy is registered, visit the RPSGB website at: www.rpsgb.org and select the link ‘Search our registers’.

Always check with your doctor or pharmacist before taking any medicines you have not been prescribed.

**Medicine names**

Most medicines have two names, the *trade* or *brand name* and the *approved* or *ingredient name*.

With most medicines, it doesn’t matter what particular brand you use. But with some you need to keep to the same brand. This will depend on your medical condition, the range of medicines available, and your particular needs. If you need to have a specific brand, your doctor should use the brand name when prescribing. Note that different brands of the same medicine may look different. Check with the pharmacist or doctor to make sure.

**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. The telephone number of your pharmacy may be on the label, and you can ring it for advice about medicines.

- The words on medicine labels should be large enough for you to read. If not, ask the doctor or pharmacist if you can have large-print labels. Braille labels may also be available.

- Don’t throw away the packaging from your medicines until you’ve finished taking them; and always read the patient information leaflet before starting to take your medicines.

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

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

- Always take tablets and capsules when standing or sitting upright. This helps to stop them getting stuck in your throat.

- Don’t crush tablets or open your capsules and dissolve them in a drink without checking with your pharmacist. This could stop them from working properly and in some cases can even be dangerous. 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.

- Most tablet bottles have child-resistant caps, which can be very difficult to open, especially if you have 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.

- There are also aids that you can get to help with such things as eye drops, tubes of ointment and measuring liquids.
If you have problems with the packaging of medicines tell your pharmacist. Do not re-pack your medicines into old bottles as this could make them less effective.

**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. First, 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. If you need to take your medicine on an empty stomach, try to get into a routine of taking it at the same times each day.

Some people find it helpful to write down the times on a calendar and tick them off each time they take a dose. The pharmacist may be able to provide a chart to help remind you.

Another way of remembering is to use a **memory aid container** or **compliance aid**. These are containers with small compartments that help you to organise your medicines. There are many different types of memory aid containers. For example, some containers have an alarm to remind you when to take your medicines. Others can have a recorded message from your doctor or pharmacist, telling you how many tablets to take and when to take them. Some open and close more easily than others, which can be important for someone with arthritis.

Ask your pharmacist for advice on the different types of memory aid container or compliance aid and how they work, or contact the **Disabled Living Foundation** on **0845 130 9177**.

Buying a memory aid yourself could be well worth it if you tend to forget to take your medicines. Take time to choose the best one for you. It is very important to make sure that you put the right medicines in the correct parts of the container. You could
ask a friend, relative or carer to check against your prescription. Take extra care if your prescription has changed recently. **If in any doubt, ask your pharmacist to check it all for you.**

Some people draw up a chart to help them remember to take their medicines. The headings might be, for example:

- What time do I need to take my medicine?
- 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 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.

Community pharmacists now provide a **Medicines Use Review** service, which means you can discuss how you take your medicines and any problems you are having. The pharmacist may, with your agreement, make suggestions to your doctor about amending your prescription, to help you.

**Safe keeping**

Never share or give your medicines to anyone else. They may be harmful to other people.

Never keep your medicines where children can reach them. Ideally medicines should be kept in a locked cupboard. Failing this, make sure all your medicine containers are closed properly.
Expiry dates

Like foods, all medicines have a limited shelf-life, called an expiry date or ‘use-by’ date. It is best to get them in small quantities and to make sure you don’t use them after the expiry date. There may be a date stamped on the container, or the letters EXP followed by a date. For example, EXP 1/07/08 would mean ‘do not use after 1st July 2008’. 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 expiry date with your pharmacist.

Some medicines go off very quickly once they’re opened. Check the label and never use them after the specified date.

Medicines 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’. Your pharmacist will make sure they are disposed of safely.

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 you get better. And, of course, some people may experience no side-effects at all.
Stomach upsets are a common side-effect. You can reduce the risk of 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 it with a snack or milky drink. However, some medicines work better when taken on an empty stomach – say, one hour before with a glass of water. If this is the case, the directions on the label will usually tell you to take your medicine before food.

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

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

You should avoid alcoholic drink if you are taking certain types of medicine. Ask your pharmacist or doctor for advice on whether you can drink alcohol while taking 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.

**Falls**

Some medicines can make you feel drowsy or unsteady on your feet, and this might mean you’re more likely to lose your balance and fall over. It’s important to be aware of this. Take care when
getting out of a chair or the bath. If you take sleeping tablets, be extra careful if you have to get out of bed during the night and when you first get up in the morning. Feeling dizzy when you stand up is more common as you get older, and some medicines can make the problem worse.

**Other types of medicines**

You should take just as much care with other types of medicines, such as ear, eye and nose drops, inhalers and creams as with the medicines that you swallow.

**Ear, eye and nose drops**

These can cause side-effects just like tablets and capsules. Make sure you use the dose that’s written on the container and **never share** your drops with anyone else. Once an eye drop container is opened, do not use it for longer than four weeks. This helps to prevent germs getting in.

You also need to be careful to stop infections being passed from one eye to the other. Try not to touch your eye when putting in your drops and if you have a separate container for each eye, make sure that you stick to using the same one each time. This will help prevent passing any infection from one eye to the other. To check how to put in your eye drops, ask your pharmacist.

If you need to use two different eye drops at the same time then make sure you leave at least five minutes between using the different drops, to make sure the first drops aren’t washed out.

If you usually wear contact lenses ask your pharmacist or doctor if they should be removed while you are using eye drops.

If you find it difficult to put in your drops, ask a friend, relative or carer for help, or think about using eye drop holders, which can make it much easier. Ask your pharmacist about these.
Creams and ointments

Creams and ointments should also be treated with care. **Always wash your hands** before and after applying a medicated cream (unless the cream is for your hands). If applying cream to someone else, protect your hands with disposable gloves, in case the ingredients are harmful to you. Wearing gloves also helps prevent infections passing between people. You can buy disposable gloves from a pharmacy, or ask your doctor to add them to your prescription.

When applying creams or ointments, use a small blob and rub in gently, unless the directions say otherwise. **Never** offer your prescription cream or ointment or any other type of medicine to someone else – it could be harmful.

Inhalers

Inhalers are a very good way of getting medication straight into your lungs to help with your breathing. However, they can be difficult to use and some people don’t manage to take in the right amount of medication.

If you have problems gripping and squeezing your inhaler, a special attachment can make the inhaler easier to use. Or you could use an inhaler which works as soon as you breathe in. Ask your pharmacist or doctor for more information.

**If you have problems with your inhaler, or if it doesn’t seem to be working properly, check with your pharmacist that you are using it correctly. If you still have problems, tell your doctor.**
**Reviewing your medicines**

If you take medicines regularly, you should have a clinical review of your medicines once a year, in case you no longer need your medicine or the dose needs to be changed. If you think your medicines aren’t working properly, and if you are getting side-effects, tell the doctor, nurse or pharmacist doing the review. If your medication is always the same you might be able to get repeat prescriptions without seeing the doctor, but you should still have an annual review.

When you ask for a repeat prescription, ask only for the medicines you need. If you stock up on all your medicines at once, it’s easy to get muddled if you have too many, or some might go out of date before you have a chance to use them.

It’s important to have your medicines checked every now and then by your doctor or pharmacist, to make sure that they’re not out of date, or that none of them is interfering with your other medicines. You could take all your medicines with you when you go for your next doctor’s appointment or for your Medicines Use Review at the pharmacy.

Your medicines may need to be changed if your health changes or if you have to go into hospital. It is important to take all your medicines with you, including any you have bought yourself. A complete list of medicines helps your doctor and pharmacist to assess your care. In some areas doctors, pharmacies and ambulances have Green Bags specially designed to use for medicines when you go into hospital. Make sure that this bag of medicines stays with you when you move around the hospital.

**Disposing of medicines**

Take unwanted or out-of-date medicines to a pharmacy for disposal. **Never** throw them out with household rubbish.
Taking your medicines safely

**Do** follow the instructions on the label. If you don’t understand them, ask your pharmacist or doctor to explain.

**Do** take medicines at meal times to help you remember them (unless the directions tell you to take them on an empty stomach).

**Do** ask your pharmacist for advice. If you buy any medicines over the counter check that the ingredients do not duplicate or interfere with what you are already taking.

**Do** check whether you need to stick to the same brand of medicine when offered repeat prescriptions.

**Do** make regular appointments with your doctor to make sure that the medicines that have been prescribed for you are still appropriate.

**Do** make sure that you fully understand the directions that the doctor or pharmacist has given you.

**Don’t** crush your tablets or open capsules and dissolve them in a drink without checking with your pharmacist or doctor first.

**Never** take more than the dose stated on the label of your medicine container.

**Never** share your medicines or give them to anyone else.

**Avoid** taking extra medicines in addition to those prescribed by the doctor.

**Always** take medicines you no longer need or use back to a pharmacy.
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Fighting for disadvantaged older people in the UK and overseas,

WE WILL:

**COMBAT POVERTY** wherever older people’s lives are blighted by lack of money, and cut the number of preventable deaths from hunger, cold and disease

**REDUCE ISOLATION** so that older people no longer feel confined to their own home, forgotten or cut off from society

**CHALLENGE NEGLECT** to ensure that older people do not suffer inadequate health and social care, or the threat of abuse

**DEFEAT AGEISM** to ensure that older people are not ignored or denied the dignity and equality that are theirs by right

**PREVENT FUTURE DEPRIVATION** by improving prospects for employment, health and well-being so that dependence in later life is reduced