

Be Alert for Medication Overload

Contributed by Denise M. Clark

Antihypertensives. Diuretics. Beta Blockers. Anticoagulants. Antiarrhythmics, vitamins, minerals, herbs. Insulin and diabetic medications, cardiac medications. What do these all mean? With hundreds, no, thousands of medications on the market, how do you know for sure that you are not being overmedicated? How do you know if your medications are causing side effects that are causing you to take yet another pill to cure?

With modern medical care comes a specialty physician who often never communicates or may not even be aware that an individual may be seeing several other physicians for other issues. How do we, as laypersons, let our doctors know what medications we are receiving and more importantly, if they are the right medications and do not interact with the other pills you may be taking?

There are several things individuals can do to do prevent errors.

- Make a list of every medication you are taking, including over-the-counter medications.
- Give a current list of all your medications, over-the-counters included, to each physician, including dentists, therapists, etc.
- Insist that when any medications are changed, your physician communicates these changes with your other doctors.
- Take responsibility to know what medications you are taking, and why. Educate yourself or ask for education from your physicians.

Know what types of food may interfere with your medications. For example, don't eat grapefruit if you take coumadin.

How do you obtain this kind of information? There are several ways. Listed are just a few suggestions.

- Talk to your doctor or his/her nurse. Ask for printed information so that you can absorb the information and refer to it frequently as needed. Most physicians are happy to give you information about your medications.

- What are the basics you need to know? For example:
 - The name of the trade name and generic name of your pills. Many pharmacies are able to provide cheaper prescriptions by using generic names.
 - How the medication works.
 - What are the side effects?

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What drugs should they NOT be used with?

All this information may be written on index cards for you to keep at home, in your wallet, and one to be given to each physician to keep in your patient file.

Pharmacies also have print outs available upon request for thousands of medications, in large print to accommodate the senior population. These forms are written in simple to understand language.

Don't be afraid to ask questions. When you visit a doctor, ask him if he has a current list of your medications and provide him with current information if he needs it.

Suddenly needing hospitalization is not only is traumatizing in itself, but many medication complications and duplications can occur in this setting simply because you may find yourself with a completely new doctor who does not have any background history of you or your treatment plans. Make sure that family and/or friends have up-to- date information on your history and prescriptions. When preparing for discharge, whether to home or another facility, make sure medications have been reviewed, resumed, or updated. When prescriptions change, be sure to discard the old pills to prevent errors. Again, insist that your medical specialists forward all new information and medications to your family physician and other care providers.

Help your doctor monitor your health. This can be done quite easily. Purchase a simple notebook and write down any side effects or difficulties you may be having with your medications. For example: nausea, dizziness, heart palpitations, etc., and what time of day they might be occurring. Keeping a diary will ensure communication of potential problems and ensure they get discussed at your doctor visit. It is all too easy to forget, especially when not feeling well. If your doctor does not know, he cannot help you.

Monitoring your medications can empower you to assist the doctor in your health care, your quality of life, and maybe even help your pocketbook.

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