

# Avoiding Medication Errors

A medication error is a preventable event that can cause inappropriate use of a product and/or harm to a patient. Medication errors can happen in hospitals, in pharmacies, and at home. You can help prevent medication errors by being a well-informed and active partner in your own health care.

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) gives this advice when you get a prescription filled: **Read the label each time before you use the medicine.** Be sure it's right in these ways:

1. **The right medicine** (check the product name and its appearance, too).
2. **For the right patient** (your name).
3. **In the right amount** (correct dose).
4. **At the right time** (when and how often to take it).
5. **In the right way** (eg, swallowing instead of chewing a pill).

Here are some more tips for minimizing medication errors:

## At the doctor's office

- Take a list of all your medications (including nonprescription medicines, vitamins, and herbal supplements) every time you go to the doctor's office, especially if you see more than one doctor. The "My Health and Medications" fact sheet (in the *Medicine Safety for Patients* section of [www.pfizer.com/medicinesafety](http://www.pfizer.com/medicinesafety)) is a useful tool for recording this information.
- When your doctor writes you a prescription, make sure you know what medicine it is for, and ask your doctor to explain it, including the name of the medicine and how often you should take it. This way, you can double-check the label when the pharmacy fills the prescription.
- If your doctor gives you a sample of medication, make sure that it includes information with your name, the reason for the medication, dosage, frequency, and any special precautions or possible side effects you should know about.
- At least once a year, bring all of your medicines and supplements with you to your doctor. This gives you and your doctor a chance to discuss your medication program and identify any problems, and helps your health care team keep your records up to date.

## At the pharmacy

- When you get a prescription filled, before leaving the pharmacy, check that you have been given the right medicine (with your name on it), know the correct dose to use, and understand how to use it. If you have had this medication before, note whether it looks the same and, if anything seems different, ask your pharmacist.
- Ask your pharmacist about any warning or instruction labels on the bottle or in the packaging that you don't fully understand.



## Avoiding Medication Errors (cont'd)

### At home

- At home, read and save all the printed information you get with your medicine, including:
  - > Consumer Medication Information (CMI), produced by the pharmacy.
  - > Medication Guides—FDA-required for some medicines.
  - > Information for Patients/Patient Counseling Information that may form part of the professional Prescribing Information (PI).
  - > Patient Package Inserts (PPIs)—produced by pharmaceutical companies; FDA-required for oral contraceptives and products containing estrogen.
  - > The label affixed to the medication container.
- Keep an up-to-date list of the medications you take now, including the dose and the name and phone number of the prescribing physician and pharmacy. Change the list when your medications change. The list should also include any nonprescription medicines, vitamins, herbal products, or supplements you use, and any allergies or sensitivities to medications that you are aware of. The “My Health and Medications” fact sheet (in the *Medicine Safety for Patients* section of [www.pfizer.com/medicinesafety](http://www.pfizer.com/medicinesafety)) is a useful tool for recording this information.
- Take note of the appearance of the pills you take, including the imprint on them. They can help you ensure that you are taking the right medicine.
- Keep medications in their original containers to avoid mix-ups with similar-looking products.
- Never take someone else’s prescription medication, not even a sample.
- Check the label every time you take a dose, to make sure you’re taking the right medicine the right way.
- Take your medication in good light so you can see what you’re taking.
- Don’t store medications in direct sun, heat, or somewhere hot and humid such as a bathroom medicine chest. Heat and humidity can affect medicines badly. And do follow any special storage instructions—while some medicines should be refrigerated, others should not be stored at low temperatures.
- Store medications out of the reach and sight of children and pets.
- Keep people’s medications separate from pets’ medicines or household chemicals to avoid taking the wrong product, particularly if you have poor eyesight.
- If you have a medicine in a tube of ointment or cream, don’t keep it next to your toothpaste.
- Don’t break, crush, or chew pills unless instructed by your prescriber.
- When you take liquid medication, only use the cup or other measuring device that came with the product to avoid dosing errors. Measure precisely.



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### In the hospital

- Take your medication list to the hospital along with your medications, so the health care team there will know what you are taking.
- Show the medications to the doctor and ask which should be sent home with your family. You may not need the same medications during your stay.
- If you are able, ask the names of each medication and why you are getting it. Asking questions can help prevent errors.
- Make sure the staff checks your patient ID bracelet before giving you medications or treatments. This can help prevent mix-ups.

When you are discharged, have a member of the health care team explain each medication you have been prescribed to take at home. Then update your medication list.

### Discard Old Medicines Safely

As environmental awareness increases, instructions for proper disposal of unwanted medicines have been updated. Here are the latest recommendations from the American Pharmacists Association (APhA) U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, and the Pharmaceutical Research and Manufacturers of America (PhRMA):

- 1. DO NOT FLUSH unused medications or pour them down the drain.** Consumers were once advised to flush their expired or unused medications; however, recent environmental impact studies report that this could be having an adverse impact on the environment. While the rule of thumb is not to flush, FDA has determined that certain medications should be flushed due to their abuse potential. Read the instructions on your medication and talk to your pharmacist.
- 2. When tossing unused medications, protect children and pets from the potentially negative effects.** APhA recommends that consumers:
  - > Crush solid medications or dissolve them in water (this applies for liquid medications as well) and mix with kitty litter or sawdust (or any material that absorbs the dissolved medication and makes it less appealing for pets or children to eat), then place in a sealed plastic bag BEFORE tossing in the trash.
  - > Remove and destroy ALL identifying personal information (prescription label) from the medication container.
  - > Check for approved state and local collection programs or with area hazardous waste facilities. In certain states, you may be able to take your unused medications to your community pharmacy.
- 3. Talk to your pharmacist.** Research shows that pharmacists are one of the most accessible health care professionals. As medication experts on the health care team, pharmacists are available to guide you on how to dispose of your unused medications properly.

