

Managing Multiple Medicines – Questions to Ask Your Doctor

(adapted from Consumer Reports – Best Buy Drugs’ “Multiple Medicines” at www.CRBestBuyDrugs.org)



Half of people age 60 and over take three or more prescription medicines on a regular basis. One in 10 takes seven or more drugs. In many cases, taking many medicines is absolutely necessary.

Unfortunately, though, the more drugs you take, the more likely you are to get one you don't need, to be prescribed the wrong drug, or to experience dangerous side effects from drug interactions. It also makes adherence to your treatment regimen more difficult, and adds to costs. Sometimes, it even lowers the chance of successful treatment.

The Latest Research

A study at the San Francisco VA Medical Center probed the records and experience of 196 people who were taking an average of eight drugs each. All were older than 65 and their average age was 75. The researchers found that 65 percent were taking at least one drug they did not need, and inappropriate use rose steadily with the number of drugs a person was prescribed. At the same time, two out of three were not prescribed a drug they should have been. Overall, 42 percent of the patients (82 of 196) were taking a drug they did not need and, at the same time, not taking one they should have been.

Taking Steps to Avoid the Problem

In the April issue of *DowFriends*, I wrote about scheduling a “brown bag” visit because you literally put all your prescription bottles, nonprescription (over-the-counter) medicines or dietary supplements (herbs, vitamins, etc.) you are taking in a bag and bring them to the doctor's office. You'll also want to make a list of any side effects or symptoms you have been having that may be related to your medicines. Here are some specific questions to ask your doctor during this “brown bag” visit:

Why do I need this drug?

Your doctor should explain clearly why he or she is prescribing a drug, especially if you are already taking two or more.

Does this drug duplicate any other medication I'm taking?

Duplications are especially likely if you get prescriptions from more than one physician. Doctors may use related or very similar medicines to treat different problems. In some cases, you may be able to keep taking the medicine that treats both problems and drop the other drug. Also ask whether you are taking a brand-name medicine and a generic that are essentially duplicative.

Is this drug meant for short or long-term use?

Doctors often intend to stop a prescription after awhile but end up prescribing it indefinitely. For example, many people end up taking medicine for GERD (gastroesophageal reflux disease) for many years even though studies indicate that for most the need for the drug stops after six months or so. If you need to start taking it again because symptoms return, you can.

Can non-drug measures reduce or eliminate my need for a drug?

Doctors and patients often turn to prescription drugs before giving lifestyle changes or non-drug treatments a chance. There is a bias towards viewing drugs as better. But that's simply not true in many cases. For example:

- Exercise and relaxation training are usually better first choices for back pain than muscle relaxants or prescription painkillers.
- Changes in eating habits and quitting smoking can usually prevent heartburn.
- People with only moderately elevated blood pressure or cholesterol levels who start exercising, lose weight, and improve their diet may be able to reduce or even eliminate their need for drugs.

Does my health or age make this drug unsafe for me?

Researchers have identified some 50 medicines that older people should always or almost always avoid, including some sedatives, pain relievers, antidepressant and anti-anxiety medications, antihistamines, and muscle relaxers. Many drugs and supplements also pose special risks to people with certain health problems, notably impaired kidney or liver function. Many other diseases can also make drugs more dangerous. For example, certain eye drops for treating glaucoma can potentially worsen asthma and heart failure.

Does this drug interact with any other medicines or supplements I take?

Many drug combinations decrease the effectiveness of one or both medicines, while others increase the risk of side effects. Some can even be life-threatening. Mixing drugs and herbs can also be bad medicine. Even vitamins and minerals can complicate the use of medications.

Warning: Don't Stop On Your Own!

Don't stop taking any prescribed medication, even if it's causing side effects, without first talking with your doctor. Stopping prematurely may trigger a worse problem. It's as harmful to skip drugs that are necessary as it is to take those that aren't. Many patients fail to take medications as prescribed because they disagree with, don't understand, can't afford, or simply can't follow the treatment plan. Next month's article will discuss strategies for making sure you use your medication safely and effectively.