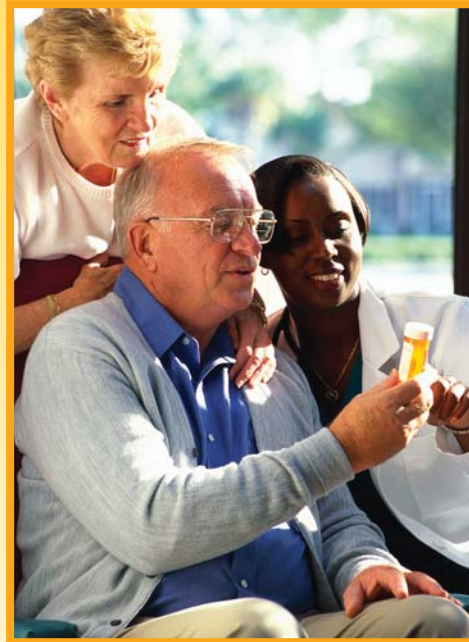




Health Canada
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Safe Medicines for Seniors

A Guide for Caregivers





Safe Medicines for Seniors

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Introduction

For whom:

A caregiver can be a friend, relative or neighbour who helps someone with daily living or health-related activities. If you help someone with medicine, take someone to doctor appointments, pick up prescriptions or check on someone on a regular basis, you are a caregiver.

Safe Medicines for Seniors: A Guide for Caregivers is for anyone helping or taking care of a senior in any way.

Purpose:

This Guide helps you identify any problems you or the person you're helping may have with medicine. If you answer yes to the questions or notice any problems, tell the person's doctor or pharmacist right away.

There may also be some simple ways you can help. Some people may be quite independent but even one event can increase their need for a caregiver. Do not assume there is no role for you, or there is nothing you can do.

How to use the Guide:

Use these questions to find out if the person you're helping is using medicine the right way. Go through each section and answer the questions in the checklist. Then check the tips section to see what you can do.

Check again every few months, if any medicine changes, or if the person visits a hospital. Bring this guide with you to the next doctor's appointment or when you pick up the next prescription, and use the checklists and charts to help you keep track of information.



General Information

Caregiver:

A friend, family member or neighbour who helps someone with daily living or health-related activities. There are many ways to help, such as helping with medicine, recognizing problems and discussing them with a health care professional, picking up prescriptions, arranging for transportation to and from appointments. In some situations caregivers may actually administer medicine, not just supervise or assist.

Sometimes caregivers themselves are seniors and the conditions and challenges addressed in this Guide apply to them as well as the person they are helping. Their attitudes towards and knowledge of the safe use of medicine are very important.

Home support worker or care provider:

A person who is paid to help someone with daily living or health-related activities. There are many other community resources, such as public health officials, hotlines, meal services and support groups.

Medicine:

Almost anything a person takes to feel better or become healthy. It includes prescription medicine and medicines that can be purchased without a prescription. It also includes natural health products such as herbal medicines. Medicines can come in the form of tablets, capsules, pills, liquids, puffers (inhalers), creams, patches, drops, needles, suppositories and ointments.

Senior:

An older adult, used here to refer to a population for whom medicine and caregiving are issues. People react differently to medicine as they age, and older people tend to take more medicine, which means there could be more medicine-related problems.



General Information

Side effects:

Also known as adverse drug reactions (ADRs), side effects are symptoms a medicine can cause besides what it was meant to do. Dizziness is a dangerous side effect because it can cause a person to fall and injure himself/herself. Mental confusion and dehydration are other dangerous side effects. Sometimes the side effects go away, and sometimes they're minor enough to handle until the medicine is finished. Some side effects are expected, and others are found through lab tests or physical exams. If you think someone is having a bad reaction, trust your instincts and take action — call the pharmacist or go to the hospital.

Some common mistakes with medicine:

- Taking the wrong dose
- Not finishing medicine
- Using expired or discontinued medicine
- Sharing medicine with others
- Mixing medicine with alcohol
- Forgetting to take medicine at the right time
- Stopping and starting medicine instead of continuing regularly

Some common problems with medicine:

- Lids on medicine containers that are hard to open
- Difficulty opening blister packs
- Instructions on labels that are hard to read or hard to understand (e.g., “as needed” or “three times a day” versus “every 8 hours”)
- Pills that are too large to swallow easily
- Inconvenient medication schedules (e.g., timing of when to take medicine with respect to meals or lifestyle)
- Medicine is too expensive to take (may be rationed or not purchased at all) or waste (may be reluctant to throw out because of cost)



General Information

Safe storage:

Medicine should be kept in a cool, dark, dry and secure place and should not be kept in the bathroom or kitchen because the dampness can affect them. The same goes for any place too warm (near a stove, heater or in the sun). The best place would be a bedroom drawer or a cupboard. Some medicine must be kept in the fridge. Try to keep all medicine together for convenience. The person should be able to get to them but not children and pets.

Not sharing:

Medicine is chosen for one person and that person specifically. Sharing with someone else may make that other person sick, and will mean there is less medicine for the person it was meant for.

Following routine and finishing medicine:

Even if a person feels better, all the medicine must be finished, or the person could get sick again. Some medicine has to be taken at certain times to make sure there is the proper amount of medicine in a person's body (*not too much, not too little*) and to make sure it works as long as possible. It may help to write a list of all medicine and note the time each has to be taken, or use a calendar. The *Medicine Chart* (page 38) at the end of this Guide can help you do this.

Preparing to go to a hospital:

Bring a list of all medicine the person is taking, (including over-the-counter medicine, vitamins and herbal/natural products such as Echinacea or Ginseng), and give it to the admissions staff to put in the person's chart. Remind doctors and nurses the list is available for their information.



General Information

Preparing to leave the hospital:

Make sure you have all the instructions and prescriptions for any new medicine needed, or any changes to old medicine. Also find out which of the old medicines to stop and which to continue — including over-the-counter medicine, vitamins and herbal/natural products. Ask any questions you might have, or write them down for the next time you see a doctor or pharmacist.

Preparing for a doctor's visit:

Prepare or write down any questions you might have. Take a list of all medicines or take the medicine to review with the doctor.

Preparing to talk to a pharmacist or to pick up

a prescription:

Prepare any questions you might have. Again, take a list of all medicine or take the medicine to review with the pharmacist.

Poison control centres:

The first page in the phonebook (white pages) lists the poison information telephone number. If you think there's been an overdose, or if the person taking medicine is having a bad reaction, call for information. Have the medicine handy to tell the operator its name.



General Information

Brand name:

The brand name is the product name of a drug (manufacturer's name).

Some drugs have multiple brand names.

Generic name:

The generic name is the chemical name of the drug.

Every drug has both a **brand name** and a **generic name**.
One example is **brand name:** *Advil*; **generic name:** *ibuprofen*.

1. Any Problems Taking Medicine?

question a *Is the person taking **someone else's** medicine?*

yes no don't know

question b *Did the person take the **wrong medicine** at any time?*

yes no don't know

question c *Did the person take the **wrong dose** (too much or too little of the medicine)?*

yes no don't know

Have you noticed anything else?



1. Tips on What You Can Do

tip a *Is the person taking **someone else's** medicine?*

If yes, ask why. Explain that prescription medicine is meant only for one person (who needs to finish it to get better), and may make others sicker.

tip b *Did the person take the **wrong medicine** at any time?*

If yes, try to find out why and what happened. There are simple ways to help if the person is taking many kinds of medicine, like using a pillbox marked for each day.

tip c *Did the person take the **wrong dose** (too much or too little of the medicine)?*

If yes, find out if it was a misunderstanding or if he/she did it on purpose. If it's a misunderstanding, review the instructions and ask the person to repeat them back to you to make sure they're understood. If the person does this on purpose on a regular basis, ask why.

If the person takes too much, ask why. The person may be expecting results faster. If so, find out from the doctor or pharmacist how long the medicine takes to work, and how to tell if it is working.

The same amount of medicine should be taken each time, unless the doctor or pharmacist says otherwise.

1. Any Problems Taking Medicine?

question d *Does the person sometimes take the medicine at the **wrong times** (or skip a dose)?*

yes no don't know

question e *Is the person **not sure** what to do if a dose is **missed**?*

yes no don't know

question f *Does the person sometimes make mistakes **taking** the medicine the **right way**? (Example: the person did not take the wrapper off the suppository before putting it in) (Example: the person put eye drops in ear) (Example: the person crushed pills that were supposed to be swallowed whole)*

yes no don't know

Have you noticed anything else?



1. Tips on What You Can Do

tip d *Does the person sometimes take the medicine at the **wrong times** (or skip a dose)?*

If yes, find out if it is a misunderstanding or if the person is forgetting doses. With a misunderstanding, make sure the instructions are clear and the person understands them. If the person is forgetting doses, you can write out a list of the person's medicine and note the times each has to be taken, or mark it on a calendar, or ask the pharmacist to make out a dosing calendar. The person can also try a watch or clock with an alarm, a pillbox marked for each day of the week, or other reminders that work for him or her. Also, talk to the doctor or pharmacist to see if the medicine can be taken with meals to make it a regular time every day.

tip e *Is the person **not sure** what to do if a dose is **missed**?*

If yes, find out by asking the doctor or pharmacist. If doses are missed often, ask why. The person may have too many kinds of medicine to remember, but there are simple ways to help. Reminder systems like setting watch alarms, writing schedules on a list or calendar, taking medicine at meal time, or using a pillbox marked for each day of the week may work for the person.

tip f *Does the person sometimes make mistakes **taking** the medicine the **right way**? (Example: the person did not take the wrapper off the suppository before putting it in.) (Example: the person put eye drops in ear.) (Example: the person crushed pills that were supposed to be swallowed whole.)*

If yes, find out if it was a one-time mistake or if the person does not know how to take it properly. Review the instructions with the person, and show him/her the proper way if you can.

1. Any Problems Taking Medicine?

question g *Is the prescription medicine from **more than one pharmacy**?*

yes no don't know

question h *Is there **old or expired medicine** in the home or is the person taking **expired or discontinued medicine** (e.g., from a previous illness)?*

yes no don't know

question i *Does the person have any **medicine samples** from the doctor?*

yes no don't know

question j *Does the person have **many kinds** of medicine to take?*

yes no don't know

Have you noticed anything else?

1. Tips on What You Can Do

tip g *Is the prescription medicine from **more than one pharmacy**?*

If yes, speak to the pharmacist to see if there are any problems taking all the medicine together. People who use more than one pharmacy have a higher chance of having problems between different medicines.

tip h *Is there **old or expired medicine** in the home or is the person taking **expired or discontinued medicine** (e.g., from a previous illness)?*

If yes, ask the pharmacist for a list of all current medicine.

Take old prescriptions to the pharmacy for disposal, (putting them in the garbage is dangerous for children or animals that might find them and flushing them is bad for the environment). This will help make sure the person does not take them by mistake. Check with the pharmacist or doctor to see if the medicine is still needed.

Also find out why the person didn't take all the medicine when they were supposed to. Some medicine doesn't work properly over time (like aspirin or eye drops) and may make the person sick. If the original problem has not gotten better, the person needs new or different medicine, not the old or expired medicine that didn't work.

tip i *Does the person have any **medicine samples** from the doctor?*

If yes, talk to the pharmacist before the person tries them, to make sure the samples go well with the other medicine the person is taking. Sample packages are a good way to test a medicine and find out if it will work for a person.

tip j *Does the person have **many kinds** of medicine to take?*

If yes, this may be confusing or discouraging. Talk to the doctor or pharmacist about making the routine simpler, like taking the medicine at meal times instead of having to remember different times throughout the day. Also, try to use only one doctor and get all the prescriptions filled at the same pharmacy, to make it easier to keep track of medicine.



2. Tips on What You Can Do

tip a *Does the person **forget to take** medicine or **forget how to take** it?*

If yes, you could write out a schedule with instructions and put it somewhere the person will see it regularly, like on the fridge door or bathroom mirror or kitchen cupboard. You could also try a pillbox with sections labelled for each day, keep the medicine in a place the person will see regularly, or have the person take the medicine with meals (unless the medicine has to be taken on an empty stomach).

tip b *Does the person have trouble **seeing or reading labels**?*

If yes, find out if the person has vision problems. To check, you may want to make an appointment with an eye doctor (optometrist). Ask the doctor or pharmacist for the name of someone nearby, or check the yellow pages phone book.

If the person can't read the label or instructions, find out if the person doesn't read well, or if the writing is in a language the person doesn't understand. You may have to read it to the person, or ask the pharmacist to print it in another language if possible.



2. Tips on What You Can Do

tip c *Does the person **not understand** what medication to take, what it does and when to take it?*

If yes, you could write out a schedule with instructions and put it somewhere the person will see it regularly, like on the fridge door, or bathroom mirror or kitchen cupboard. You could also write out an explanation. (e.g., “the small white pill is to thin your blood to make it easier to go through your veins”.) If you’re not sure yourself, ask the doctor or pharmacist, who may also have information pamphlets.

Try to make sure the person gets the instructions written in his/her own language. Ask the person to repeat them back to you, to make sure they’re clear. Be sure the person knows: the medicine name, what it does, how to take it, when to take it, how long to take it, where to keep it in the house, possible side effects and what to do if they happen, what to do if a dose is missed, if alcohol should be avoided, if the medicine should be taken with meals, and how to tell if it’s working.

Having this information is important for the person’s understanding, and also helps if a new health care professional needs to know (like a specialist or a health care professional in a hospital).

Review instructions with every prescription refill or doctor’s visit. Make sure the person feels comfortable asking questions. If the person is embarrassed or shy, prepare the questions together then you can ask them.

2. Any Problems With Mind or Body?

question d *Does the person use **glasses, contacts** or a **magnifying glass**?*

yes no don't know

question e *Is the room **too dark** for the person to see instructions or labels well?*

yes no don't know

question f *Does the person have **trouble hearing** instructions?*

yes no don't know

question g *Does the person use a **hearing aid**?*

yes no don't know

Have you noticed anything else?



2. Tips on What You Can Do

tip d *Does the person use **glasses, contacts** or a **magnifying glass**?*

If yes, make sure they are in good shape, and are handy and available. Also, if it would help, ask the pharmacist to print the person's prescription labels in bigger type.

tip e *Is the room **too dark** for the person to see instructions or labels well?*

If yes, open the curtains, turn on the lights, or add a lamp.

tip f *Does the person have **trouble hearing** instructions?*

(Does the person tilt his/her head towards you, ask you to speak up or repeat yourself, or try to read your lips?)
If yes, the person may have hearing problems. Turn off the television or radio, face the person directly, speak slowly and clearly but do not shout. Explain instructions, then ask the person to repeat them back to you. You could also write them down to help the person remember.

tip g *Does the person use a **hearing aid**?*

If yes, make sure it is working properly and has a good battery. You could also write down instructions, or make the person repeat them back to you to make sure they're clear.

2. Any Problems With Mind or Body?

question h Does the person have trouble *swallowing pills* or other medicine?

yes no don't know

question i Does the person have trouble *cutting pills, using inhalers, giving needles, using drops* or *measuring medicine*?

yes no don't know

question j Does the person have trouble *opening medicine bottles*?

yes no don't know

Have you noticed anything else?



2. Tips on What You Can Do

tip h *Does the person have trouble **swallowing pills** or other medicine?*

If yes, tell the doctor or pharmacist and ask if the medicine comes in a different form, like a liquid or two smaller pills instead of a large one. Check the label or ask if the medicine can be taken crushed and taken in water or in food. Sometimes all a person needs is to take a sip of water to wet the throat before trying to swallow a pill.

tip i *Does the person have trouble **cutting pills, using inhalers, giving needles, using drops or measuring medicine**?*

If yes, ask the person to show you what the problem is. The solution may be as simple as practising. If it's still a problem, talk to the pharmacist for tips.

tip j *Does the person have trouble **opening medicine bottles**?*

If yes, does the person have stiffness, pain, swollen joints or shaky hands? Is the person clumsy or feeling weak?

If yes to these questions, tell the pharmacist, who can change the lid or use a different container.

3. Any Other Problems With the Medicine?

question a *Does the person have problems **paying** for the medicine?*

yes no don't know

question b *Does the person **not want to take** medicine?*

yes no don't know

question c *Is the person afraid of **side effects**?*

yes no don't know

question d *Does the person have problems **getting to the doctor or the pharmacy**?*

yes no don't know

Have you noticed anything else?



3. Tips on What You Can Do

tip a *Does the person have problems **paying** for the medicine?*

If yes, ask the pharmacist to use or suggest less expensive medicine, and look into other ways to pay for it like insurance or a family member's benefits.

tip b *Does the person **not want to take** medicine?*

If yes, find out why. Don't lecture, just ask.

The person may feel he/she is taking too many kinds of medicine, the medicine is making things worse, the medicine is not working, or the medicine is working against other medicine. If so, have the person talk to the doctor or pharmacist in person or on the telephone for more information or to discuss concerns. There are many simple things that can be done to help.

tip c *Is the person afraid of **side effects**?*

If yes, talk to the doctor or pharmacist. They will have more information and may change the medicine to stop or prevent side effects.

tip d *Does the person have problems **getting to the doctor or the pharmacy**?*

If yes, talk to a health care professional about volunteer transportation services in your community, or contact a local home support agency. Also, talk to the pharmacist about picking up prescriptions yourself or having them delivered.



3. Any Other Problems With the Medicine?

question e *Does the person **need more help** with medicine, or want more information?*

yes no don't know

question f *Does the person **not finish** medicine?*

yes no don't know

Have you noticed anything else?



3. Tips on What You Can Do

tip e *Does the person **need more help** with medicine, or want more information?*

If yes, find out how you can help, or who else can. Talk to other family members, friends or neighbours who may also be able to help. You can also check the phone book to find many community-based supports like Telehealth, seniors' resource centres, the Victorian Order of Nurses (VON) and the Red Cross.

tip f *Does the person **not finish** medicine?*

If yes, find out why. If there are side effects, tell the doctor and pharmacist. If the person is feeling better, remind the person he or she can get sick again if the medicine is stopped too early. Also point out that some sickness doesn't show itself all the time, but is still there (like high blood pressure or high cholesterol).

3. Any Other Problems With the Medicine?

question g Does the person give their medicine to **other people**?

yes no don't know

question h Does the person keep medicine **without labels** or put medicine into **old bottles**?

yes no don't know

question i Does the person **store medicine** in a warm place (near a stove or in the sun) or in a damp place (like the bathroom or kitchen)?

yes no don't know

question j Does the person take **other medicine** such as vitamins, herbs, natural remedies or other medicines that don't come from a medical doctor or pharmacist?

yes no don't know

Have you noticed anything else?

3. Tips on What You Can Do

tip g *Does the person give their medicine to **other people**?
If yes, find out why. Make sure the person understands the medicine is only for him/her, has to be finished and can make other people sick.*

tip h *Does the person keep medicine **without labels** or put medicine into **old bottles**?
If yes, mark the contents on the containers or ask the pharmacist for extra labels to put on additional containers.*

tip i *Does the person **store medicine** in a warm place (near a stove or in the sun) or in a damp place (like the bathroom or kitchen)?
If yes, move the medicine to a cool, dry place like a bedroom drawer or cupboard. Make sure the person can get to them but children and pets can't.*

tip j *Does the person take **other medicine** such as vitamins, herbs, natural remedies or other medicines that don't come from a medical doctor or pharmacist?
If yes, make sure the doctor and pharmacist know what the person is taking. They may mix with the medicine and cause problems.*

3. Any Other Problems With the Medicine?

question k *Does the person drink **beer, wine** or **liquor** while taking medicine?*

yes no don't know

Have you noticed anything else?

4. Any Changes in Medicine?

question a *Has the person's medicine **changed** lately? (e.g., in the last two to four weeks)*

yes no don't know

question b *Has the person been in the **hospital** lately? (e.g., in the last two to four weeks)*

yes no don't know



3. Tips on What You Can Do

tip k *Does the person drink **beer, wine** or **liquor** while taking medicine?*

If yes, make sure it's okay to have alcohol while taking the medicine. Check the medicine instructions and label, and ask the doctor or pharmacist to make sure.

If it's not okay, the person will have to stop drinking alcohol, or drink less, while on the medicine. Explain that alcohol can make side effects worse, or make the medicine not work.

Alcohol and medicine do not mix well. Alcohol interacts with many kinds of medicine, often reducing their effectiveness and causing many side effects like impaired coordination, stomach irritation, nausea and vomiting. This may happen even if there is a long time between the dose and the drink.

4. Tips on What You Can Do

tip a *Has the person's medicine **changed** lately? (e.g., in the last two to four weeks)*

If yes, be especially careful to watch for any problems or new developments. Review the questions in this Guide every few months.

tip b *Has the person been in the **hospital** lately? (e.g., in the last two to four weeks)*

If yes, be especially careful to watch for any problems or new developments.

5. Any Changes in the Person?

question a *Has the person had any changes in **appearance** (skin, complexion, eyes, nails, hair)?*

yes no don't know

question b *Has the person had any changes in **appetite** (eats more, doesn't want to eat, feels sick to stomach, has dry mouth, is more thirsty)?*

yes no don't know

question c *Has the person had any changes in **behaviour**, memory, mood or thoughts?*

yes no don't know

question d *Has the person had any changes in **bladder** patterns (more or less often, smell, colour, pain)?*

yes no don't know

question e *Has the person had any changes in **bowel** patterns (diarrhea, constipation, gas)?*

yes no don't know

5. Tips on What You Can Do

tips for all Has the person had any changes in:

a Appearance (*skin, complexion, eyes, nails, hair*)?

b Appetite (*eats more, doesn't want to eat, feels sick to stomach, has dry mouth, is more thirsty*)?

c Behaviour, *memory, mood or thoughts*?

d Bladder *patterns (more or less often, smell, colour, pain)*?

e Bowel *patterns (diarrhea, constipation, gas)*?

If yes to any of these questions, describe the specific change and tell the doctor and pharmacist right away. The problems may go away, or may be a sign of new problems.

Have you noticed anything else?

5. Any Changes in the Person?

question f *Has the person had any changes in **comfort** (any pain, aches, headaches)?*

yes no don't know

question g *Has the person had any changes in **energy** (more tired or more energy)?*

yes no don't know

question h *Has the person had any changes in **mobility** or getting around (walking, standing up, dizziness, falling)?*

yes no don't know

question i *Has the person had any changes in **sleeping** (can't stay awake, or can't fall asleep)?*

yes no don't know

question j *Has the person had any changes in **vision** (can't see as well as usual, is seeing spots, or vision is blurry)?*

yes no don't know



5. Tips on What You Can Do

tips for all Has the person had any changes in:

f Comfort (any pain, aches, headaches)?

g Energy (more tired or more energy)?

h Mobility or getting around (walking, standing up, dizziness, falling)?

i Sleeping (can't stay awake, or can't fall asleep)?

j Vision (can't see as well as usual, is seeing spots, or vision is blurry)?

If yes to any of these questions, describe the specific change and tell the doctor and pharmacist right away. The problems may go away, or may be a sign of new problems.

Have you noticed anything else?

Person Taking the Medicine

It may be useful to know some things about the person you're helping, especially if you have to act on the person's behalf.

How many different medicines is the person taking?

Does the person have:

- | | |
|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Allergies (e.g., pollen, cat dander, peanuts, shellfish) | <input type="checkbox"/> High blood pressure |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Arthritis | <input type="checkbox"/> High cholesterol |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Bladder problems | <input type="checkbox"/> Intolerance to certain medicines (e.g., penicillin) |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Breathing problems | <input type="checkbox"/> Kidney disease (or impaired kidneys) |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Cancer | <input type="checkbox"/> Low iron in blood (anemia) |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Circulation problems | <input type="checkbox"/> Pain |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Constipation | <input type="checkbox"/> Sleeping problems |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Depression or other mental illness | <input type="checkbox"/> Stomach problems |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Diabetes | <input type="checkbox"/> Stroke |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Diarrhea | <input type="checkbox"/> Other _____ |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Heart problems | _____ |

When was the person's last doctor's appointment?

When was the last time the person talked to a pharmacist?



Person Taking the Medicine

If the person sees a specialist, when was the last appointment? _____

Doctor's name, office telephone number and address:

Pharmacy's name, telephone number and address:

Specialist's name, telephone number and address:



Questions for the Doctor, Pharmacist or Specialist

For every medicine, ask:

- The name of the medicine?
- What it does?
- How to take it?
- When to take it?
- How long to take it?
- Any special storage conditions?
- Possible side effects and what to do if they happen?
- What to do if a dose is missed?
- If alcohol is okay?
- If the medicine should be taken with meals?
- How to tell if it's working?
- If there are any special containers or packaging needed?
- How to dispose of or throw away old medicine?
- If there are any pamphlets or other information you can take to read later?

Other points to remember:

- Try to get written instructions in the person's own language, so he or she can understand better.
- Review medicine and instructions with every doctor's visit or prescription refill.
- Make sure the doctor and pharmacist know about any other medicine the person is taking that they did not give the person themselves (like medicine from a specialist, or vitamins and herbs).
- If the person is embarrassed or shy, prepare questions together, then you can ask them.



Contact Information

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