



Older Adults and Medication Safety

What is a Prescriptive Opioid?

Prescription opioids are powerful pain-reducing medications that have benefits, as well as potentially serious risks. When used properly, opioids can help manage severe pain, but when misused or abused, they can cause serious harm, including addiction, overdose and death. Common types of opioids are Morphine, Oxycodone, Hydrocodone and Codeine.

As they age, older adults may develop health conditions that can be treated with over-the-counter medications, or those that have been prescribed by a physician. Research from the National Institute on Drug Abuse found that more than 80 percent of older patients took at least one prescription medication on a daily basis, with more than half of this population taking more than five medications or supplements daily.

Given these statistics, it is particularly important that older adults pay special attention to the instructions on their medications. Wise use of medications is critical to one's health and well-being. In fact, it can be lifesaving.

Prescription Opioids

In recent years doctors have increasingly prescribed medications that are commonly referred to as opioids. While prescription opioids can help alleviate chronic and debilitating pain, they can be misused, leading to injury and death. In fact, deaths related to the misuse of prescription opioids have more than quadrupled since 1999. Given the effects of aging on a person's health, it is essential that older adults take particular care when using these powerful drugs.

Tips for the Wise Use of Medications

In the publication *Medicines and You: A Guide for Older Adults*, the Federal Drug Administration recommends the following tips for the safe use of medications.

- **Learn about your medicines.** Read medicine labels and package inserts and follow the directions. If you have questions, ask your doctor, pharmacist or other health care professional.
- **Talk to your team of health care professionals** about your medical conditions, health concerns, and all the prescription and over-the-counter (OTC) medicines you take, as well as dietary supplements, vitamins and herbal supplements. The more your doctors know, the more they can help. Don't be afraid to ask questions.
- **Keep track of side effects or possible drug interactions** and let your doctor know right away about any unexpected symptoms or changes in the way you feel.
- **Make sure to go to all doctor appointments** and to any appointments for monitoring tests done by your doctor or at a laboratory.
- **Use a calendar, pill box or other tool** to help you remember what medications you need to take and when. Write down information your doctor gives you about your medicines or your health condition.
- **Take a friend or relative with you to your doctor's appointments** if you think you may need help understanding or remembering what the doctor tells you.
- **Take only your own medicines.** Taking someone else's medicine may hide your symptoms and make diagnosing your illness more difficult for your doctor. It could also create a bad reaction with other medicines you are taking, putting your health at risk.
- **Always keep medicines in their original containers, and never put more than one kind of medication in the same container.**
- **Have a "Medicine Check-Up" at least once a year.** Go through your medicine cabinet to get rid of old or expired medicines at an appropriate drug disposal site. Also ask your doctor or pharmacist to go over all of the medicines you now take. Don't forget to tell them about all the OTC medicines, vitamins and dietary or herbal supplements you take.
- **Keep all medicines out of the sight and reach of children.**



Tips for the Safe Handling and Storage of Medications

Keeping medications in a secure and safe place and out of sight of anyone who might misuse them—either by accident or by theft—is very important. Talk to your pharmacist about how and where you should properly dispose of your medications.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, **about 60,000 young children end up in emergency rooms each year because of medicines that were within their reach.** The Up and Away and Out of Sight initiative (www.upandaway.org) offers the following precautions that all adults, particularly grandparents, should keep in mind:

- Keep all medicines and vitamins up and away and out of sight in a high cabinet or other place your grandchildren can't reach or see.
- Keep purses, bags or coats that have medicines or vitamins in them out of the reach and sight of small children.
- Never leave medicines or vitamins out on a table, countertop or bedside table where your grandchildren could reach them. Relock the safety cap and put your medicines away after every time you use them.
- Set a daily reminder to take your medicines and vitamins on your refrigerator or a location you check on a daily basis, since they will be safely stored up and away and out of sight.

RESOURCES

Medication Management Programs can help prevent emergency visits. These programs offer education and helpful instruction on ways to efficiently manage your medicine schedule. Many programs are coordinated through local Area Agencies on Aging. For more information and to find a local program in your community, contact the Eldercare Locator.

Eldercare Locator

1-800-677-1116

Monday-Friday, 9:00 a.m. - 8:00 p.m. ET
eldercarelocator.acl.gov

Launched in 1991, the Eldercare Locator is the only national information and referral resource to provide support to consumers across the spectrum of issues affecting older Americans. The Locator was established and is funded by the U.S. Administration on Aging, part of Administration for Community Living, and is administered by the National Association of Area Agencies on Aging (n4a).



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The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's National Helpline

1-800-662-HELP (4357)

TTY: 1-800-487-4889

www.samhsa.gov/find-help/national-helpline

This national helpline is a free, confidential, 24/7, 365-days-a-year treatment referral and information service (in English and Spanish) for individuals and families facing mental and/or substance use disorders.

Food and Drug Administration

1-888-INFO-FDA (1-888-4636-332)

www.fda.gov

The FDA provides timely, reliable, health and safety information about food, drugs, medical devices and more.

Critical Conversations Series

Older Adults and Medication Safety is part of the Eldercare Locator's Critical Conversations series of fact sheets, which address emerging topics and important issues impacting the health and well-being of older adults.

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