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SP717-How to Avoid Medication Errors

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UT Extension
SP 717

How to Avoid Medication Errors

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Did You Know That Taking Medications Is As Easy as PIE?
If you know the purpose of each medication, understand the instructions for use and dosage and know the outcomes (effects) to expect, then taking your medication can be as easy as **PIE**.

Purpose and name of the medication.
Instructions for use and dosage:
- How many times a day?
- Time of day?
- With food or without food?
- How long to take it?
- What if I miss a dose?
- Should I avoid alcohol, sunlight, certain foods, etc.?

Effects of the drug, both positive and negative.

We all take medications at one time or another. Many of us take medications daily for a chronic condition. On average, Tennesseans use between 15 and 17 prescriptions per person per year. In addition, people also take over-the-counter (OTC) medications and supplements and herbals. However, nearly half of Americans do not take their medications as directed or check their prescriptions to make sure they have the right medications. Medication errors can cause you unnecessary discomfort or waste your money. At the very worst, these errors can even be life-threatening.

What is a medication error?

A medication error is any preventable event that may cause or lead to inappropriate medication use or physical harm. A medication error can occur in ways that you have no control. But you can prevent some kinds of medication errors by taking an active role in your medical care. You need to understand your medications and take more responsibility for monitoring them. Check (☑) the ways you plan to try to avoid medication errors.

At Your Doctor's Office or Outpatient Clinic

☐ Take your medication list with you every time you go to your doctor's office, especially if you see more than one doctor. Each doctor must know about all the medications other doctors have prescribed for you.

☐ Ask your doctor to explain what is written on every prescription, including the drug name and how often you should take it. Then when you pick up a prescription at the pharmacy, you can double-check the information on the label.

☐ Tell your doctor you want the purpose of the medication written on the prescription. Many drug names look alike when written poorly; knowing a drug's purpose helps you and your pharmacist double-check the prescription.

☐ If your doctor gives you samples, make sure that he or she checks them to be sure they won't interact with your other medication(s). Pharmacies have computers that check for drug interactions and allergies. However, if your doctor gives you samples, this important check may be missed.

☐ Make sure you know the PIE for each drug you are prescribed. (See box above.)

☐ Ask your doctor for educational material about your medications. You can also look up the specific medication on the Internet. A reliable source is the National Institutes of Health's Web site on medications and supplements at www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/druginformation.html.

At Your Pharmacy

☐ Make sure your pharmacist has an up-to-date list of all the medications you are taking.

☐ Make sure the name of the drug (brand or generic) and the directions for use received at the pharmacy are the same as that written down by your doctor.

☐ Know that you have the right to talk to your pharmacist if you have any questions. You can ask the pharmacist to explain how to properly take the drug, the side effects of the drug, and what to do if you experience side effects.

☐ If the medication does not look the same as last time, ask your pharmacist about it.

☐ Ask for written information about the medication.

A handout providing helpful steps to avoiding medication errors is available at the National Patient Information and Education Web site at www.talkaboutrx.org/documents/make_notes_bw.pdf. Visit the UT Extension Health Program Be MedWise Tennessee Web site for more information about medications at bemedwisetn.tennessee.edu.

At Home

☐ Maintain a list of the prescription drugs, over-the-counter drugs and other products, such as vitamins and minerals, dietary supplements and herbals that you take. Use the UT Med Minder card to keep a record of your medications. You can get this wallet-sized card from your county UT Extension office or you can print a copy from the UT Extension Health Program, Be MedWise Tennessee Web site at bemedwisetn.tennessee.edu.

☐ Carry this list with you and have it reviewed every time you visit a health care provider.

☐ Keep this list of medications up-to-date.

☐ If you have a question about your medications, write it down so you can remember to ask your doctor or pharmacist.

☐ If you suspect a medication error, call the Tennessee Poison Center at 1-800-222-1222 for immediate first aid and treatment advice. The medical hotline is open 24 hours a day, seven days a week. All calls are free of charge. Learn more about the poison center at its Web site, www.tnpoisoncenter.org.

☐ Never take someone else's medication. You don't know if it will interact with your medications, the dose may be wrong for you, or you may be allergic to it.

- ☐ When taking liquid medication, use the cup or measuring device that came with it. Dosing errors can happen if you use a different cup or household measuring spoons, which are not very accurate.
- ☐ Turn on lights, and if needed, put on your glasses to take your medication(s). If you can't see what you are taking, you may take the wrong thing. Call the Tennessee Poison Center if you suspect you have taken the wrong medication.
- ☐ If your doctor has scheduled you for surgery, ask whether there are medications – especially prescription antibiotics – that you should take or stop taking before surgery.

At the Hospital

- ☐ Take your medication list or your medications in their original containers with you and have the health care provider review the medications you are taking.
- ☐ Ask the doctor or nurse what drugs you are being given.
- ☐ Do not take a drug without being told its purpose.
- ☐ Tell someone if you think you are getting the wrong medication.
- ☐ Exercise your right to have a friend or family member present whenever you are receiving medication if you are unable to monitor the process yourself.
- ☐ Prior to being released from the hospital, ask for a list of the medications that you should be taking at home, and make sure you know the PIE for each medication you are to take at home.

Adapted from Preventing Medication Errors, Institute of Medicine, Report Brief, July 2006. http://www.iom.edu/Object.File/Master/35/943/medication%20errors%20new.pdf.

For more information on medications and health, contact your county UT Extension office:

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Center for Community Health Literacy

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