



Care Partner Information

Tips for Providing Older Adult Care

Taking Medications Safely

Almost half of all older adults take more than five different medications every day. Each medication has rules to follow in order to stay safe and healthy. Following the different rules for each is very important, but sometimes it can be hard to do.

Types of Medications

Medications can include those prescribed (given or ordered) by your doctor or nurse, “over-the-counter” medications, and herbal.

Three Types of Medications (Pills or other Treatments)	
Prescription	Medications such as pills, creams, ointments or injections, ordered by a doctor or nurse and filled by a pharmacist.
Over-the-counter (OTC)	Medications sold without a prescription. These include aspirin, pain relievers, laxatives, and cold medicines. Be careful when mixing over-the-counter and prescription medications because it can cause bad side effects.
Herbal	Herbal medications and products sold without needing a prescription. These include vitamins, dietary supplements and teas. “Natural” does not always mean safe. Many herbal medications can make prescription medications weaker, or cause bad side effects.

Medications come in many forms. These include pills or capsules that can be swallowed, chewed or dissolved, liquids, patches, creams, inhalers, solutions that are injected, suppositories, ointments, and eye drops or ear drops.

Keep all medications in one location except those that must be kept cold in the refrigerator. Keep medications away from sunlight, heat, steam and moisture. Keep medications away from children and others with poor judgment, such as those with dementia. Avoid mixing medications into one bottle or reusing empty bottles for other medications.

This Care Partner Information page is part of a series on older adult caregiving tips. They are written to help family and community caregivers, direct care workers and community health representatives care for older adults. Available in English and Spanish at www.aging.arizona.edu

Watch for side effects

Medications can have side effects that might make an older adult feel sick, act unusual or have trouble doing daily activities. Side effects can be sleeping too much or too little, acting confused, being sad or depressed, feeling dizzy or weak, not wanting to eat, having trouble talking or remembering things, and bathroom-related problems. A health care provider should be told right away about any of these symptoms because it may be a side effect of a medication.

Medication list

Keep an up-to-date list of all medications (prescription, over-the-counter, herbal and vitamins) in your purse or wallet. Include the medication name, how much is taken, and how often the medication is taken. If you have any allergies to foods or medications, add this to the list. Take the list to all health care visits and emergency room visits. Keep a copy of the list on the refrigerator. Many communities have programs where first responders, like 911 paramedics, are trained to look at the refrigerator for medication lists. They can make sure the medication list goes with the older adult to the hospital. This can save time in an emergency, and help doctors

A Pharmacist Can...	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Review a medication list to make sure all medications are right 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide easy to open bottle tops and labels in large print
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Give advice on different medication forms available, such as liquids, skin patches or suppositories 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Help set up a pill reminder system. This can be a simple plastic container, or a high-tech container that beeps when it's time to take a pill
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Help develop a plan to work medication schedules into daily routines 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Cut pills in half if the dose should be 1/2 of a pill

provide better care.

Do NOT put medications in the trash or toilet

Medications can harm our environment if they get into the soil and water. Medications that are not used, or out of date, should be taken to a prescription drug drop-off. Most communities have one at the police department. Some pharmacies also will take back old medications to get rid of in a safe way.

Useful Websites

- Pima Council on Aging: (520) 790-7262 <https://www.pcoa.org/>
- Pima County Medication Disposal program: (520) 724-7911 <http://www.disposeamed.pima.gov>

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