



How to keep your cures from becoming killers

Every day, 34 Americans die in their *home* because of a *preventable* medication mistake. Don't think it could happen to you? Neither did they.

Always remember that medications have the ability to heal *and* harm. As a patient and caregiver, the power to do both is in *your* hands.



Here are some important things you can do to protect yourself and the ones you love:

..... At the Doctor's Office

- ❖ **Tell your doctor about ALL the medications you take** including over-the-counter products, vitamins, and natural remedies such as herbals. Make sure they take the time to *screen for possible harmful conflicts*.
- ❖ **Ask how you will know if a medication is working or causing side effects.** Will the medication change the way you feel? If so, how, and by when? What kind of follow-up can you expect (e.g. blood tests), and when?
- ❖ **Don't settle for anything less than a "safe prescription."** A safe prescription is a medication order that:
 - ❖ **You can take with you.** If your doctor says your prescription is being sent directly to the pharmacy, ask for a copy. This way you'll have something to compare against what you actually get from the pharmacy.
 - ❖ **You can read.** If you can't read the prescription, are you willing to bet your life that your pharmacist can?
 - ❖ **Explains what the medication is for.** Simply writing a medication's purpose (diabetes, blood pressure, infection, etc) can greatly cut the chances of getting a wrong medication at the pharmacy.

..... At the Pharmacy

- ❖ **Always use the same pharmacy and make sure they know about ALL of your allergies, medications and health conditions.** This increases the chances that there is at least one healthcare provider who can see your *complete* medication picture and help you avoid dangerous medication conflicts.

At the Pharmacy

- ❖ **Ask for written information about your medication.** If possible, get it right when you get to the pharmacy and review it while you wait for your prescription. This way, you can be prepared to ask your pharmacist questions when your medication is ready.
- ❖ **Make sure you get the correct medication.** Check the name on the label of the pill bottle to ensure you haven't accidentally been given someone else's medication. (This is the most commonly reported pharmacy error). While you are at it, compare the information your doctor gave you to what's written on the label. If something does not match up, ask why.
- ❖ **Don't waive your right to speak with a pharmacist.** CA law requires that your pharmacist provide verbal consultation on every new or changed prescription. Unfortunately, many patients unknowingly waive this right by signing a form when they pick up their medication.
- ❖ **Let the pharmacist read you the label.** While you may be perfectly able to read the label yourself, having the pharmacist do this provides one last chance to catch any problems. Many medication errors are caught by this simple act.
- ❖ **Ask the pharmacist questions.** Every pharmacist entering the profession must have a doctor of pharmacy degree, and as such they are the medication expert on your healthcare team. This is your last chance to make sure you know what benefits to expect from the medication, the best way to take it (e.g. in the morning or at bedtime, with or without food), and what side effects to look out for.
- ❖ **When you need to, *complain*.** If ever you do not receive the professional service you deserve, make a complaint to the manager of the pharmacy or store. When that doesn't work, complain to the district manager, or the CA Board of Pharmacy (916-574-7900). Don't be afraid to say that you'll be transferring your prescriptions to another pharmacy - often times, it's only through actions like this that meaningful change occurs.

At Home

- ❖ **Take your medication only as prescribed.** This means not taking more or less than the doctor ordered. Your medication and dose has been specifically selected based upon *your* unique needs. Your healthcare team has screened for interactions and knows to monitor you for certain side effects. For these reasons, you should *never* share prescription medications.
- ❖ **Always keep an eye out for side effects or bad reactions.** To help remember what to look for, keep the written information you received from the pharmacy and review it every 1-2 months. If you are experiencing a problem that may be caused by a medication, call your doctor or pharmacist *before* making any changes. With some medications, it can actually be more harmful to suddenly stop taking it.
- ❖ **Store your medications safely.** A lot of medication injury is caused when a person takes the wrong medication, or when a medication gets taken by the wrong person (e.g. a child or spouse). To keep this from happening, store your medications in a secure place in their original containers, and make sure each one is clearly labeled with the user's name and the condition for which they are taking it (e.g. blood pressure).
- ❖ **Make a complete, up-to-date list of ALL your medications, allergies and health conditions.** Keep copies at home and in your wallet, and think about giving a copy to a family member or close friend. A list like this can go a long way to help a doctor, pharmacist or emergency medical worker give you the best care possible. To get a free medication wallet card, please visit www.PharmacyFoundation.org.