

TIMELY RESOURCES CAREGIVER GUIDES SERIES:

MEDICATION CONCERNS

Ann Koegler

Altenheim Resource Services

July, 2025



Empowering older adults, caregivers, & their advocates with information on resources and aging issues since 1995

Medications have become something we take for granted. If there's a diagnosis, there is often something to take for the primary health care concern(s) or the symptoms.

Often when we walk in the health care provider's office, we come out with a prescription.

Have you paid attention to ads that are everywhere – online, in print, on TV? There are a lot of them! We are directed to ask for one medication or another for whatever is bothering us. "Talk to YOUR doctor about...." has become a tag line for many of these marketing spots.

Be a wise consumer!

There are options for health conditions but we have to be our own best advocate and be aware of what those options are. We need to be informed consumers. We need to read labels and insert sheets. We need to ask questions.

As a consumer, know what you are taking. As a caregiver, be aware of the facts about the medications.

Know that medications can be prescribed by a health care professional, they can be on the shelf at the local store, or you can purchase them online.

Know that there are many ways we can "take" medications. They can be ingested. They can be used topically. They can be eye drops or ear drops. For those who use aromatherapy, the product is diffused and we get the benefit through our sense of smell.

Know that these preparations can interact with one another.

Know that medications can have side effects such as drowsiness, dry mouth, confusion, constipation or diarrhea, GI upset, and more. Talk to your health care provider about side effects.

This booklet offers some information on medications and what you may want to consider as a consumer or as a caregiver.

The information does NOT take the place of professional medical guidance! See your health care professionals with any questions!

This Timely Resources Care Guide is one in a series of informational resources for older adults, consumers, caregivers, care receivers, and their advocates. Other guides can be found on our webpage: www.altenheimcommunity.com.

Contact us for information on aging issues and caregiving at 304 243-0996 or akoegler1995@gmail.com

Ann Koegler
Resource Services Coordinator

THINK ABOUT MEDICATIONS

When you think about medications, what do you think of?

Prescription, over-the-counter, or “alternative”?

Prescription

The first thing that comes to mind might be the statin drug you take every night or the pill you take to help ease the pain of arthritis. We may also think of the medications for high blood pressure, bone density, and the SGLT-2 inhibitors and insulin for diabetes. But did you think about the steroid shots for your knees or the eye injections for glaucoma? All of which were prescribed by your health care provider.

Over-the-counter

You also need to consider over-the-counter medications such as allergy tablets, vitamins and minerals, laxatives, pain relievers, eye drops, and sleep aids. These preparations are available without a prescription although stores may have limits on some cold and allergy medications purchases. We can go into our local pharmacy and buy any number of drugs used to treat any number of conditions.

Alternative

What is “alternative medicine”? The [National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health](https://www.nccih.nih.gov/health/complementary-alternative-or-integrative-health-whats-in-a-name) explains what complementary and integrative medicine entails, and also provides more information and resources. (<https://www.nccih.nih.gov/health/complementary-alternative-or-integrative-health-whats-in-a-name>).

Very generally, these are treatments that are outside traditional medicine. Herbal preparations, essential oils, massage therapy, acupuncture, and homeopathy are examples of alternative medicine.

There may be a specialty shop where we can buy any number of preparations to treat what is bothering us. We can find preparations on store shelves. We can order them online from many different suppliers. Some companies have sales associates or wellness representatives.

Acupuncturists practice in many settings. Massage therapists may have their own business or they may work with physical therapists or hospice care.

You need to think about the herbal preparations such as the liver cleanse, the chamomile to help with insomnia, and the St John’s Wort to help with depression. Perhaps you use essential oils. Oils are potent and can have side effects or cause reactions just like “traditional” medications. (Most are not regulated by the Food and Drug Administration.)

Read about the herbal preparation or the essential oil before using them. Explore the risks and benefits. Check out the quality producers and companies. Are essential oils pure or are they a blend? Not all products are created equal!!

Be aware of any contraindications with massage or chiropractic care. Check with your health care provider before using any alternative therapies to make sure they don’t negatively impact your health or other medications.

Things to consider

Whether we are looking at medication management for ourselves or for a care receiver, it is necessary to be aware of the impact that medications can have. Here are some things to keep in mind.

Size: The pill may look small or the dosage may seem low but you need to consider what's IN the medications.

Mixing medications: Should you avoid taking any of your medications at the same time? Should there be an interval of time between doses? People can very innocently mix medications and then experience side effects.

When should you take the medication: Should the medication be taken in the morning or in the evening?

Mixing medications and other substances: The effects of some medications are exacerbated when used with other substances or preparations. (Think about the effect of mixing alcohol with allergy medications or sleeping preparations.) Should you avoid using any "alternative" preparations when you take your prescription medication?

More isn't necessarily better: Some people believe that "more is better" (especially with over-the-counter preparations and herbal preparations), so they up the dose and they have a bad reaction.

"Alternative" medications: What people may not realize is the potency and the side-effects of "alternative" preparations. Botanicals, essential oils, and naturopathic preparations contain compounds that can impact our health. Depending on the compound, there are anti-oxidant, anti-inflammatory, or immune-boosting properties. They can serve as aids to digestion and also relieve stress and anxiety. These preparations are not to be treated lightly.

We need to be aware of all of the medications, over-the-counter drugs, herbal preparations, and other "curatives" or treatments that we use. Take into consideration any interactions when we mix substances such as alcohol.

MEDICATION ISSUES

According to the [Merck Manual Consumer Version](https://www.merckmanuals.com/home/older-people-s-health-issues/aging-and-medications/aging-and-medications#Benefits-and-Risks-of-Prescription-Medications_v838778), “Approximately 90% of older adults regularly take at least 1 prescription medication, and 43% regularly take at least 5 different prescription medications. When over-the-counter and dietary supplements are included, these rates are even higher. Older adults who are frail, hospitalized, or in a nursing home take the most medications.”

[Source: Merck Manual Consumer Version, https://www.merckmanuals.com/home/older-people-s-health-issues/aging-and-medications/aging-and-medications#Benefits-and-Risks-of-Prescription-Medications_v838778]

Older people are more likely to have long-term illnesses such as arthritis, diabetes, high blood pressure, and heart disease that require them to take medications on a regular basis. Of course, there is a medication for each illness resulting in several different medications. When do we take them? Do we take them with food or without? Are there medication or food interactions?

There are factors that we need to look at if we are an older adult or if we are caring for an older adult.

Older People Don't Metabolize Drugs As Quickly

The liver and kidneys break down and remove most drugs from the body. As we age, the organs may not work as rapidly or as efficiently, and some drugs may be processed more slowly. Water, muscle, and fat play a part in metabolizing drugs which impacts how quickly they leave the body. Make sure to confirm dosages with your health care provider.

[Source: Merck Manual Consumer Version, https://www.merckmanuals.com/home/older-people-s-health-issues/aging-and-medications/aging-and-medications#Benefits-and-Risks-of-Prescription-Medications_v838778]

Different Health Care Providers Prescribe Different Medications

Many of our health care providers' records are networked throughout the system (ie: WVU Medicine, UPMC Medicine, etc). However, many consumers go to providers who are outside the system. Make sure that all of the providers have current medication lists – prescription, over-the-counter, herbal, and other preparations.

Health Care Providers Need to Know About All Medications – ALL Medications

Tell the primary care provider about all the prescription medications, over-the-counter preparations, herbal supplements, and other.

*All prescription drugs from any doctor including eye drops, creams, and ointments.

*Non-prescription medicines including vitamins, minerals, antihistamines, nasal sprays, sleeping pills, laxatives, cold/flu medications, anti-acids, and anything else.

*Folk remedies, non-traditional products, or alternative medicines such as plant compounds, herbs, special teas, essential oils, or nutritional supplements.

*Social drugs such as alcohol, tobacco/vaping/smoking, caffeine, energy drinks, etc.

It is helpful to have all the medications/substances/preparations that the patient is taking/using. There can be interactions with the prescribed medications as well as with the substances. Keep a list with you in case of emergency.

Pharmacists can give you information on the side-effects of medications and over-the-counter preparations.

If you are using herbal preparations, essential oils, homeopathic or naturopathic preparations, make sure you are informed. Read about the recommended uses, effects, side-effects, and sourcing. Consult a homeopathic or naturopathic professional with any questions.

CONSUMER GOALS

- *Be prepared to be your own best advocate or your care receiver's advocate
- *Follow the health care provider's and the pharmacist's instructions. If you don't understand, ask for clarification.
- *Know about the medications and substances you are taking/using and their side effects.
- *Know if the medications and substances are safe to use together.
- *Ask for generic names to keep the costs lower.
- *If you have limited resources:
 - >contact your local [State Health Insurance Program](#) for information on cost-saving programs through Medicare,
 - >check on available drug discount programs,
 - >check on patient assistance programs through pharmaceutical companies
 - >for those with Medicare Advantage products, talk to the patient advocate.

WHEN TO GET PROFESSIONAL HELP

A drug reaction can be a life-threatening emergency. Here are some serious symptoms that could be the result of a drug reaction. These can begin shortly after starting a new medication, when the dosage (amount and/or frequency) changes, or in conjunction with a non-prescription substance.

Call the primary health care provider or call 911 immediately if any of the following occur:

- *Hallucinations (hearing and/or seeing things that aren't there)
- *Palpitations or rapid heart beat
- *Shortness of breath (if sudden or severe, call 911 immediately and consult the doctor)
- *Trouble waking up especially when trying to rouse the person
- *Severe nausea and/or vomiting
- *Dizziness, falling, trouble with balance
- *Unusual bruising or bleeding from minor cuts; blood in the stool
- *Severe confusion
- *Severe fatigue
- *Impaired or blurry vision, seeing gold halos around objects
- *Hives, itching, skin rash, facial swelling
- *Black, tarry stool

>>>It is especially important to call 911 or get the person to an emergency room immediately if they have difficulty breathing or swelling in the throat.

While some side effects from medications happen immediately, others happen slowly over a period of days, weeks, or even months. What may seem like a new health problem or worsening of an existing condition, may be a reaction to a medication.

- *Incontinence
- *Depression, feeling "down", taking no interest in activities previously found enjoyable
- *Constipation
- *Persistent cough
- *Insomnia
- *Feeling jittery, anxious, or fearful
- *Sensitivity to sunlight

Be prepared with these answers to the following questions before calling the doctor. You may need all this information.

Symptoms

- *What are the symptoms? Try to be accurate and specific.
- *When did the symptoms start?
- *Are the symptoms new or is there an ongoing problem that is now worse?
- *How severe is the symptom? Does it interfere with usual activities?

Medicines

- *What medicines are being taken? (Include prescription, over-the-counter, and herbal preparations)
- *Is the older person following instructions for prescription medicines? If not, what is being taken and how much?
- *Have any doses been missed? Has the care receiver gone one or two days without the medication?
- *Does the person have any allergies?

ADDITIONAL NOTES TO CONSIDER

Note on medical care

We have seen more hospitals changed to a central health system (such as WVU Medicine or UPMC Medicine) so be sure you know how to reach your primary health care provider. Review their office policies so you know what to do in case of questions or an urgent situation. Also update your records as you go through the health care providers.

Information on insurance coverage

- *Medicare
- *Medicare Supplement

There will be two cards if you or the care receiver has traditional Medicare and a Medicare supplement. Medicare is the primary payer for services and the Supplement is secondary, most often covering the balance after Medicare has approved and paid their part of the claim. Different companies provide supplemental policies.

OR

- *Medicare Advantage Plan

There will be one insurance card as the Medicare Advantage plans, also known as Part C, are offered by private companies approved by Medicare. These bundle Parts A and B (and usually Part D for prescription drugs) into one plan. Many plans also offer additional benefits not typically covered by Original Medicare, like vision, hearing, and dental care. Many companies provide Medicare Advantage products.

Dual eligibles

Some Medicaid beneficiaries are assigned to Medicare Advantages as Dual Eligibles (those who receive Medicare and Medicaid benefits). These consumers may have different benefits under their Medicare Advantage plan.

Medicare's website offers a [comparison](https://www.medicare.gov/basics/get-started-with-medicare/get-more-coverage/your-coverage-options/compare-original-medicare-medicare-advantage) between Medicare + Medicare Supplement and Medicare Advantage coverage.

<https://www.medicare.gov/basics/get-started-with-medicare/get-more-coverage/your-coverage-options/compare-original-medicare-medicare-advantage>

Information on Prescription Drug Coverage

With Medicare + Supplement, drug coverage (Part D) is obtained/purchased separately. Several companies offer Part D (Prescription drug coverage) products at different prices. The plan that you or the care receiver has will determine coverage.

What if I can't afford medications?

Talk to your primary health care provider about options. Is there another drug?

Check with your Part D provider or your Medicare Advantage provider. Are there special considerations for the medications? Is there a waiver process requesting a lower price?

Check with the medication discount programs such as Visory Health, Single Care, or other for discounts.

Check on a Patient Assistance Program from the manufacturer of the drug for drug coverage for those who meet eligibility requirements. You will need documentation from the primary health care provider.

Talk to the patient care navigator or the social worker about agencies that may be able to help with medication costs.

What You Can Do to Help

***Keep a record of all medications and preparations taken. Make a list.**

Prescription

Over-the-counter

Herbal

Essential oils

Any other preparations

***Ask the health care professional to review the medications and explain the reason for each prescription at least once a year.**

***Write the name of each prescription, the health care professional who prescribed it, what it is for, the amount prescribed and the amount taken, the times of day it is to be taken, should it be taken with food.**

***A copy of the list should be kept in the medicine cabinet and in the wallet or purse. Some people opt to keep a copy in an envelope on their refrigerator. Make sure to keep the list updated!**

***Do you need to consider an emergency alert bracelet? Emergency bracelets alert first responders and others to any medical conditions or prescriptions.**

Medic Alert: <https://www.medicalert.org/>

American Medical: <https://www.americanmedical-id.com/>

Amazon: <https://www.amazon.com>

***Make sure the pharmacy's information is correct and up-to-date. The pharmacist is a good resource for information on prescriptions, side-effects, drug interactions, and also for information on over-the-counter drugs that can be used with different health conditions and different prescriptions.**

***Labels can be really difficult to read. Ask the pharmacist to confirm the information on the label including expiration date, number of refills, and directions for use. If you don't understand, ask for clarification. For example – the label says “take three times a day”. What does that mean?**
Does that mean every 8 hours?
Does the care receiver need to be awakened to take the medication?
Should the medication be taken with food or before or after a certain amount of time?
What should you do if a dose is missed?
Can it be taken with other medications?

***Do you need child safety caps? They can be difficult for older adults to open.**

***Store medications appropriately. Although many people keep their medications in the bathroom, the high moisture content may adversely affect the medications. Many tablets and pills lose efficacy if exposed to moisture, heat, and/or light. Store medications in the refrigerator ONLY if told to do so.**

***Keep medications in their original containers. Mixing pills in different containers can be confusing and result in medication misuse.**

***Keep medications in a safe place. Avoid keeping them in the older person's nightstand. They may awaken in the middle of the night and take an extra dose. Be sure to lock meds in a cabinet or safe box if there are others in the home.**

***Have the older person sit up or stand when taking pills, and use half a cup of water to wash them down. It may help to take a drink before taking the pills to moisten the mouth.**

***Use water not milk to wash down pills. Some medications are less effective when taken with milk. If swallowing is a problem, ask the pharmacist if the medication is available in liquid form. Some compounding pharmacies can help with different forms of the medication. You can also ask about crushing the pill and mix it with applesauce or other soft food. Some pills or tablets should not be crushed.**

***Use a pill box or pill reminder. You can find these at your local pharmacy, Wal-Mart, or grocery store. Some are 7 day reminders and some have days and times marked: morning, noon, evening, and bedtime.**

***For medicines that cannot be placed in a pillbox such as creams, liquids, or drops: a reminder note on the refrigerator or bathroom mirror may help jog the memory.**

***Use reminders. A checklist or chart may help in showing when the medication should be taken. Alarms or timers may be helpful.**

***If someone needs to take medications several times a day, you may want to check on alternative medications. There may be an extended release dose or one that doesn't need to be taken as often.**

***Some medications are available in patch form which are placed on the skin and changed every few days.**

***Check the expiration dates on medications and throw away old medications. There are drug take-back days at pharmacies and grocery stores. Some pharmacies keep containers for medication disposal.**

***We may think it's a good idea to hold on to unused medications (Just in case...) but stockpiles of medications can be dangerous and confusing. Some medications lose their strength after a limited amount of time and others may changes in the chemical composition.**

***Don't discontinue or change the dosage of a medication without first consulting the health care professional. Some medications need to be stopped gradually.**

STAYING ON TOP OF THINGS

Managing medications and making sure they are used safely and appropriately are an important part of caregiving and an important part of aging independently. Be attentive to the schedule. Change or stop medications only with the approval and supervision of the primary health care provider.

Be organized. Be consistent. Ask questions. When you see changes or when you experience changes, contact the primary health care provider. Is it the medication? Is it a change in an existing condition? Is it a new condition? Count it be related to medications?

If it is still difficult to manage medications, you may want to discuss the situation with the primary health care provider or ask the primary health care provider about a home health consult. The assistance of an in-home service provider (non-medical) could also offer help as they can remind care receivers to take their meds. Depending on the situation, it may be time to look at alternative housing such as assisted living or nursing home care.