

# CAREMATTERS...to us

A Series of Guides from **MetLife** in Cooperation with the National Alliance for Caregiving

## MEDICATIONS AND THE OLDER ADULT

### ABOUT THE SUBJECT

**M**edications are probably the single most important means that health care professionals have at their disposal to help prevent illness, disability, and death in the geriatric population. When used correctly, prescribed medications and those purchased directly by consumers greatly improve the health and independence of older Americans.<sup>1</sup> As the number of older adults continues to rise, so do the number of medications used.

The right medications prescribed in the right doses can produce medical “miracles.”<sup>2</sup> For many older Americans, using multiple medications at the same time is a necessary part of life. They use drugs to manage such chronic conditions as heart disease, lung disease, arthritis, pain, and depression.

When medicines are taken correctly, they offer the best hope for longer and better lives for those with chronic illnesses. However, the use of several prescriptions and over the counter (OTC) medications, including herbal supplements, combined with the many normal changes in an aging body, increase the chances of an adverse reaction to drugs for the older person. Serious health problems, disability and even death can be the result.

Older Americans are hospitalized six times more than the general population due to adverse drug reactions.<sup>3</sup> This 12% slice of the population consumes at least 30% of all prescription medications and 24% of the nonprescription or

over the counter drugs.<sup>4</sup> Most older persons take at least one medication, with the average being 4.5 prescription medications and two OTC medications.<sup>5</sup>

It is difficult for an aging body to absorb medicine in the same way as a younger body because its systems don't function as efficiently as before. There may be medication errors if the person forgets to take his medicine or gets confused trying to remember a medication schedule. All of these factors can affect how long a drug stays in the body, how much is absorbed and the amount that needs to be taken to work effectively.

Nearly every heart medication, blood pressure drug, sleeping pill and tranquilizer has been known to cause depression. Such symptoms as change in mood, energy, attitude and memory can be the first signs that a drug is not working correctly. Symptoms such as drowsiness, confusion and loss of coordination can also be adverse reactions that may lead to an increased

*Caregivers face many challenges as they search for information and make decisions about how best to provide care to their loved ones. To help meet their needs, MetLife offers CareMatters—a series of guides which provide practical suggestions and useful tools on a variety of specific care-related subjects.*

risk for falls, auto accidents and loss of ability to function independently.

## THINGS YOU NEED TO KNOW

### Types of Medications

- ♥ Prescription medications are those medications that require a prescription (written order) from your physician. These medications must be obtained through a licensed pharmacist. Generic prescription medications are products the Food and Drug Administration has judged to be equal to the name brand product. Often they are less expensive than name brands, and may be substituted for the name brand if approved by the doctor and/or pharmacist.
- ♥ Nonprescription medications, or over the counter medications can be purchased without a doctor's prescription.
- ♥ Herbal, or natural remedies medicine, are individual herbs or herbal preparations. For the most part, they may be purchased without a doctor's prescription.

When taking prescription medicine, make sure to check with the physician or pharmacist before taking OTC or herbal remedies. Many of the OTC medications have at one time or another been prescription medications. Make certain to read the label on the medication to see if the medicine is the right one to use, for warnings and directions for use.

Both OTC and herbals can cause adverse reaction when taken in combination with some prescription medications. Nonprescription drugs are real medicine, and many prescription medications are based on herbal ingredients. Both can cause harmful interactions if not taken appropriately. Studies have shown that fewer than 30% of older adults take their medication properly.<sup>6</sup>

### Food and Medicine

Drugs, whether prescription, OTC or herbal, can all interact with food, preventing the drugs from working properly. Some medications should be taken an hour before or two hours after eating. Because some medications can cause stomach upset when taken on an empty stomach, they may need to be taken with a snack. Check with the doctor or pharmacist about which food or drinks to avoid. Vitamins should generally not be taken at the same time as medications, as vitamins and minerals can interact with some drugs. Avoid taking medicine with any alcoholic beverage. Read the instructions carefully and completely on how to take your medicine, including prescription and OTC medications.

### Ask the Doctor

- ♥ Be sure the doctor's chart lists all medications. Because an older person often has more than one physician, make certain the whole medical team is informed of any current medications. Ask if the primary care physician will coordinate the drugs.
- ♥ Be sure you know why each medication is being prescribed.
- ♥ Ask if a generic substitute may be used for a name brand drug.
- ♥ Be sure you understand the dose/amount to take, the frequency and whether or not taking it at the same time every day is important.
- ♥ Ask how long the medication should be taken.
- ♥ Ask about any known side effects/problems for which you should be watching.
- ♥ Ask for written instructions, if possible.

### Ask the Pharmacist

- ♥ Ask your pharmacist about any adverse drug interactions, either with other prescription medications or with OTC or herbals.
- ♥ Ask about common allergic reactions that you should watch for.

- ♥ Ask the pharmacist about receiving the generic equivalent of your medicine if it's available and if the doctor agrees.
- ♥ Ask about what to do if you miss a dose. **Don't** wait until it happens.
- ♥ Ask if the medication is affected by heat, light, or moisture.
- ♥ Ask if you can cut the drug or crush it if it is a hard tablet, or open it if it is a capsule.
- ♥ Ask about food/drink interactions.
- ♥ Ask if insurance covers any of the medications.
- ♥ Ask about expiration dates to determine safe and effective use.
- ♥ Ask for only half the prescription if it is a new medication, in case it causes a reaction.
- ♥ If there is anything written on it that you do not understand, ask about it.
- ♥ Ask the pharmacist about a previously prescribed drug that might have a different name, for example, Tenormin®, the brand name, and Atenolol, the generic name for the same drug.

### Physical Challenges

- ♥ If you suffer from arthritis, ask the pharmacist for oversized, easy open bottles.  
*If young children visit often, be sure to keep the bottles locked in a cabinet or on a high shelf.*
- ♥ If you have difficulty with reading small print, ask for large print prescription labels or use a magnifying glass to read.

### Memory Problems

When memory problems interfere with taking medications appropriately, there are many helpful tools you can use.

Some examples are:

- ♥ Special alarm clocks or watches to alert you when it's time to take medicine.

- ♥ Calendars or charts that can be used to list the names of the drugs and the time they should be taken.
- ♥ Pillboxes or systems that help dispense the right amount of medicine at the correct time.
- ♥ Paging systems that will beep to help keep your medication schedule on track.
- ♥ Telephone medication reminder systems that will call you when it's time for your medicine.
- ♥ From pharmacies, medications dispensed in pre-packaged doses so that you don't need to worry about dispensing too much or too little.
- ♥ See *Resources to Get You Started* for companies offering these aids.

### Cost-Saving Measures

Prescription medication costs accounted for nearly \$105 billion in 1999, and is expected to rise to nearly \$212 billion by 2004.<sup>7</sup> Older Americans spend 33.9% to 40.2% of their out-of-pocket expenses on prescription medications.<sup>8</sup> Expensive medications can often cause individuals to juggle prescription refills with necessary items such as food, utilities, and housing costs. Following are some suggestions that may assist in managing prescription medication costs:

- ♥ Ask about senior citizen discounts.
- ♥ Ask about discount cards.
- ♥ Comparison shop at local pharmacies. Often pharmacies will meet other competitive prices.
- ♥ Ask about the generic equivalent for a prescription.
- ♥ Ask about a larger quantity of pills per prescription. Often larger quantities of 100 pills or more are less expensive.
- ♥ Ask if your medication can be split. You can often save by asking your doctor to prescribe your medication at a dosage that can be split.  
*Example: If you take 20 mg per day of a medication, request a 40 mg dose, purchase*

*a pill splitter, cut the pill in half and take over two days.* Make sure to check with your pharmacist if there is a time limit on when a split pill must be taken.

- ♥ Consider mail order.
- ♥ Contact organizations related to your disease e.g., Parkinson's, ALS, MS, Alzheimer's, and ask about a pharmacy discount program.
- ♥ Contact Pharmaceutical Research and Manufacturers of America (PhRMA) to receive a directory of participating pharmaceutical programs. It offers many prescription drugs free of charge to older adults and people who cannot afford them. Call 800-762-4636 or access them online at [www.phrma.org](http://www.phrma.org).
- ♥ Contact the local Area Agency on Aging regarding senior pharmacy programs in your area. They assist eligible seniors in locating sources for reimbursement to help pay for prescription medications.
- ♥ Contact the Medicine Program, which assists in attaining prescriptions for those who qualify. The site is [www.themedicineprogram.com](http://www.themedicineprogram.com), or call 573-996-7300.
- ♥ Consider buying prescriptions online.
- ♥ Many states have discount programs for low-income people. Check with your state Medicaid office for information and eligibility.

### Buying Prescriptions Safely Online

Purchasing medications via the Internet, from a legitimate pharmacy site, may often provide individuals with easy, private, cost effective means of obtaining their medications. Legitimate sites offer the ability to consult with a licensed pharmacist in the privacy of one's home. There is access to abundant product information, and ease of comparative product shopping. There are, however, some precautions to take when ordering medications online:

- ♥ Do not order from companies that only

require completion of a questionnaire. A physical exam by the doctor and a prescription should be required for any prescription medication.

- ♥ Do not buy from sites that don't offer access to a registered pharmacist for questions.
- ♥ Do not buy from sites that don't identify with whom you are dealing or do not provide a U.S. address and phone number for problems.
- ♥ Check to see if the pharmacy is VIPPS (Verified Internet Pharmacy Practice Sites) certified. This certification is voluntary but has rigid conditions for certification. You may also check with the National Association of Boards of Pharmacy to see if the site is a licensed pharmacy in good standing. VIPPS is an assurance that such sites are meeting all applicable state and federal requirements. They can be reached at 847-698-6227 or on the Internet at [www.nabp.net](http://www.nabp.net).
- ♥ Do not provide any personal information such as Social Security number, credit card or health history, unless you are confident that the site will protect the information. Make certain the site does not share your information with others without permission.

<sup>1</sup> *Older Americans Most At Risk To Medication-Related Problems*  
Alliance for Aging Research  
June 9, 1998.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Nanada, C., Fanale, J.E., Kronhom, P.  
*The Role of Medication Noncompliance and Adverse Drug Reactions in Hospitalizations of the Elderly*  
Archives of Internal Medicine  
150(4):841-46  
1990.

<sup>4</sup> *Older Americans Most At Risk To Medication-Related Problems*  
Alliance for Aging Research  
June 9, 1998.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> SeniorLink.com, "Dad, Did You Remember to Take Your Pills?"  
[www.seniorlink.com](http://www.seniorlink.com)  
2002.

<sup>7</sup> Mullins, C.D., Palumbo, F., Stuart, B.  
*The Impact of Pipeline Drugs on Pharmaceutical Spending*  
Center on Drugs and Public Policy  
University of Maryland School of Pharmacy  
(presented at a joint BCBSA/HIAA Symposium, April 13-14, 2000).

<sup>8</sup> Crystal, S. Johnson, R., Harman, J.  
*Out-of-Pocket Health Care Costs Among Older Americans*  
Journal of Gerontology: Social Sciences 55B, S51-S62  
2000.

## RESOURCES TO GET YOU STARTED

### Books and Publications

- ♥ *Medications and Older Adults* (from the FDA)  
*Making Your Medications Work Better* (FDA and American Pharmaceutical Association)  
*My Medicines* (FDA's Office of Women's Health and the National Association of Chain Drug Stores)

These publications are available from the Federal Consumer Information Center and can be obtained free by calling 888-878-3256, M-F, 9 am-8 pm, EST. Ask for the "*Taking Medications*" package.

[www.pueblo.gsa.gov/press/nfcmedications.htm](http://www.pueblo.gsa.gov/press/nfcmedications.htm)

- ♥ **The U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA)** Consumer Affairs Office has more information about safe use of medicines. Contact the FDA at 5600 Fishers Lane, HFE 88, Rockville, MD 20857, or call 301-443-3170.
- ♥ **The Elder Health Program** has free information about older people and medications. Contact the Elder Health Program, School of Pharmacy, University of Maryland at Baltimore, 20 North Pine Street, Baltimore, MD 21201, or call 410-706-3011.

### Medication Aids/Reminders

- ♥ **e-pill medication reminders** offers various types of medication reminders, pill organizers, automatic pill dispensers, multi-alarms and medical watches. [www.epill.com](http://www.epill.com)
- ♥ **MD.2 Personal Medication System** is a home-based system that will help dispense any solid oral medication simply by the user pressing a large external button when the alarm sounds. It also gives verbal and text reminders for non-oral or specific medication directions. Reach them by writing Interactive Medical Developments, L.C., P.O. Box 578, Webster City, IA 50595-0578, phone, 877-563-2632, fax, 925-846-0718 or on the Internet at [www.imd2.com](http://www.imd2.com).

- ♥ **On-Time-RX** works with a Palm™ handheld computer. This program allows those with a handheld or Palm™ computer to set reminders for times, dosing, memory triggers, etc., for their medications. You can reach them by mail, phone or Internet. AmeliaPlex, Inc., 1103 East Amelia St., Orlando, FL 32803, phone 888-383-8688, fax 407-628-4160 or on the Internet at [www.ontimerx.com](http://www.ontimerx.com).
- ♥ **Verbaprompt** is a telephone service providing verbal prompts as medication reminders to people who need them. It also gives prompts to assist with performing other medically necessary tasks. Reach them by writing to Verba Prompt, P.O. Box 3209, Schnectady, NY 12303, phone, 518-372-6172 or access them on the Internet at [www.verbaprompt.com](http://www.verbaprompt.com).

### Internet

- ♥ **Administration on Aging**  
This site is maintained by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and provides resources, news and developments and information for older adults.  
[www.aoa.dhhs.gov](http://www.aoa.dhhs.gov)
- ♥ **Consumer Information Center**  
A service of the U.S. General Services Administration, this site provides free online consumer information for the public.  
[www.pueblo.gsa.gov](http://www.pueblo.gsa.gov)
- ♥ **Food and Drug Administration**  
This is the regulatory division of the Federal government that monitors and regulates food and drug safety. [www.fda.gov](http://www.fda.gov)
- ♥ **Healthtouch® Online**  
Healthtouch Online is an information guide only, compiling information from a variety of credible consumer health organizations. They have an extensive medication guide containing information about a variety of prescription drugs. [www.healthtouch.com](http://www.healthtouch.com)

## USEFUL TOOLS

Enclosed are two tools to help you with medication management.

- ♥ Medication Record Information
- ♥ Pillbox Setup

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS OF CAREMATTERS

**CAREMATTERS** guides are prepared by the MetLife Mature Market Institute in cooperation with the National Alliance for Caregiving and MetLife's Nurse Care Managers.

**MetLife Mature Market Institute** is the company's information and policy resource center on issues related to aging, retirement, long-term care and the mature market.

**MetLife Nurse Care Managers** are available to MetLife's long-term care customers and their caregivers, on a daily basis, to help identify and resolve caregiving questions and concerns through counseling and referral.

**National Alliance for Caregiving** is a non-profit coalition of 38 national organizations that focuses on issues of family caregiving.

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