



Be An Active Member of Your Health Care Team

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
Food and Drug Administration
in cooperation with the
Council on Family Health



When it comes to using medicine, it is important to know that no medicine is completely safe.

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) judges a drug to be safe enough to approve when the benefits of the medicine outweigh the known risks for the labeled use.

Doctors, physician assistants, nurses, pharmacists, and YOU make up your health care team. To reduce the risks from using medicines and to get the most benefit, you need to be an active member of the team.

*To make medicine use **SAFER:***

- **S**peak up
- **A**sk questions
- **F**ind the facts
- **E**valuate your choices
- **R**ead the label and follow directions



SPEAK UP

The more information your health care team knows about you, the better the team can plan the care that's right for you.

The members of your team need to know **your medical history**, such as illnesses, medical conditions (like high blood pressure or diabetes), and operations you have had.

They also need to know **all the medicines and treatments you use**, whether all the time or only some of the time. Before you add something new, talk it over with your team. Your team can help you with what mixes well, and what doesn't.

It helps to give a **written list** of all your medicines and treatments to all your doctors, pharmacists and other team members. Keep a copy of the list for yourself and give a copy to a loved one.

Be sure to include:

- prescription medicines, including any samples your doctor may have given you
- over-the-counter (OTC) medicines, or medicines you can buy without a prescription (such as antacids, laxatives, or pain, fever, and cough/cold medicines)
- dietary supplements, including vitamins and herbs
- any other treatments
- any allergies, and any problems you may have had with a medicine
- anything that could have an effect on your use of medicine, such as pregnancy, breast feeding, trouble swallowing, trouble remembering, or cost

ASK QUESTIONS



Your health care team can help you make the best choices, but you have to ask the right questions. When you meet with a team member, have your questions written down and take notes on the answers. You also may want to bring along a friend or relative to help you understand and remember.

Use the **Question Guide** at the end of this pamphlet to help you get the answers you need from your health care team. If you don't understand an answer, ask again.

FIND THE FACTS

Before you and your team decide on a prescription or OTC medicine, learn and understand as much about it as you can, including:



- **brand and generic (chemical) names**
- **active ingredients**—to make sure that you aren't using more than one medicine with the same active ingredient
- **inactive ingredients**—if you have any problems with ingredients in medicines, such as colors, flavors, starches, sugars
- **uses (“indications” and “contraindications”)**—why you will be using it, and when the medicine should/should not be used
- **warnings (“precautions”)**—safety measures to make sure the medicine is used the right way, and to avoid harm
- **possible interactions**—substances that should not be used while using the medicine. Find out if other prescription and OTC medicines, food, dietary supplements or other things (like alcohol and tobacco) could cause problems with the medicine
- **side effects (“adverse reactions”)**—unwanted effects that the medicine can cause, and what to do if you get them
- **possible tolerance, dependence, or addiction**—problems that some medicines can cause, and what you can do to avoid them

- **overdose**—what to do if you use too much
- **directions**—usual dose; what to do if you miss a dose; special directions on how to use the medicine, such as whether to take it with or without food
- **storage instructions**—how and where to keep the medicine
- **expiration**—date after which the medicine may not work, or may be harmful to use

Your pharmacy, the library, the bookstore, the medicine maker, and the Internet have medicine information made for consumers. If you have questions, ask your health care team.

EVALUATE YOUR CHOICES – Weigh the Benefits and Risks

After you have all the information, think carefully about your choices. Think about the helpful effects as well as the possible unwanted effects. Decide which are most important to you. This is how you weigh the benefits and risks. The expert advice from your health care team and the information you give the team can help guide you and your team in making the decision that is right for you.



READ THE LABEL AND FOLLOW DIRECTIONS

Read the label to know what active ingredient(s) is (are) in the medicine.

The active ingredient in a prescription or OTC medicine might be in other medicines you use. **Using too much of any active ingredient may increase your chance of unwanted side effects.**

Read the label each time you buy an OTC medicine or fill your prescription.

When buying an OTC, read the "Drug Facts" label carefully to make sure it is the right medicine for you. Prescription and OTC medicines don't always mix well with each other. Dietary supplements (like vitamins and herbals) and some foods and drinks can cause problems with your medicines too. Ask the pharmacist if you have questions.



Before you leave the pharmacy with your prescription, be sure you have the right medicine, know the right dose to use, and know how to use it. If you've bought the medicine before, make sure that this medicine has the same shape, color, size, and packaging. Anything different? Ask your pharmacist. If your medicine tastes different when you use it, tell your health care team.

Read and save all the information you get with your medicine.

Read the label each time *before* you use the medicine. Be sure it's right in 5 ways:

1. the right medicine
2. for the right patient
3. in the right amount
4. at the right time
5. in the right way (for example, swallow instead of chew a pill)

Follow directions on the label and from your health care team. When you are ready to use the medicine, make the most of the benefits and lower the risks by following the directions.

If you want to stop a medicine your doctor told you to use or to use it in a different way than directed, talk to a team member. Some medicines take longer to show that they are working. With some medicines, such as antibiotics, it is important to finish the whole prescription, even if you feel better sooner. When you stop using some medicines, you must reduce the dose little by little to prevent unwanted side effects.

REPORT BACK TO THE TEAM

Pay attention to how you feel. If you have an unwanted effect, tell your health care team right away. A change in the dose or a change in medicine may be needed.

QUESTION GUIDE

Use this guide with your health care team to find out what you need to know about the medicines you use, and about the medicines you are thinking about using. Be sure to find the answers to these questions for any sample medicine your doctor gives you.

- What are the brand and generic (non-brand) names of the medicine?
- What is the active ingredient?
- Could I use a generic form?
- What is the medicine for, and what will it do for me?
- When should I start to feel better?
- When should I report back to the team?
- Will this medicine take the place of any other medicine I have been using?
- Should I avoid any drinks, foods, other substances, or activities while using this medicine?
- Can this medicine be used safely with the other medicines and treatments I already use? Does this include prescription and OTC medicines, vitamins, herbals, or other supplements, and other treatments?
- Should I avoid starting other medicines (prescription or OTC), dietary supplements (like herbals and vitamins) or other treatments while I am using this medicine?
- What are the possible side effects from this medicine? What do I do if I get a side effect?
- Is there any chance that I could become tolerant, dependent or addicted to this medicine? What can I do to avoid this?
- How and when should I use the medicine, in what amount, and for how long? Are there any special directions for using this medicine?
- Will I need any tests (blood tests, x-rays, other tests) to make sure the medicine is working as it should? How will I get the results?
- What should I do if I miss a dose? What should I do if I use too much by mistake?
- How and where should I keep this medicine? (Remember: Always put medicines out of the sight and reach of children and pets.)
- Where and how can I get more information about this medicine?

Remember: To reduce the risks of using medicines and to get the most benefit, you need to be an active member of your health care team.



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