

MassMedLink to Health

Information on Medication Safety

There are several reasons why someone may not take his/her medication properly. The cost of the medication may be too expensive. If some one cannot afford his/her medication that person is simply not taking the medication. The directions on how to take the medication may not be clear or misunderstood. Possibly, the patient is concerned about potential side effects. There may be confusion as to what the medication is being used for or the patient may feel fine and feel that there is no need for the medication.

The first tip for safe medication use is to learn about your medication.

Ask the name of your medicine. All medications have a brand name and a generic name. Ask the purpose of the medication, what is the medication for and what it is supposed to do? Next, ask what to expect. For example, how long before the medication takes effect? Some medications take weeks or even months before the full therapeutic effect is reached. Also, check to see what type of monitoring is needed, for example blood test, or follow-up procedures.

Continuing on with learning about your medications, ask, **what are the side effects?** Some side effects may occur only at the start of taking a new medication. Some side effects occur after the medication has been taken for some time. Ask if the medication will interact with other medications that you are currently taking. Make certain to check for possible interactions with over the counter products, vitamins, and herbals you are also taking. Learn how to store your medication. Some medications require refrigeration until opened while other are best left at room temperature. Be careful of storage places where there are significant temperature and humidity changes for example the bathroom medicine cabinet or a cabinet close to the stove in the kitchen.

Also, know the dose of your medication. **How much and for how long will you be taking the medication?** Some medications require a loading dose which is a larger first dose followed by a lesser dose thereafter. Other medications may require a smaller first dose, followed by a slow increase in the dose until the needed dose is reached. Ask what to do if you miss a dose. Also be aware that some medications should not be stopped abruptly, but instead decreased over time. Understand the correct measurement of the medication. A kitchen teaspoon or tablespoon can vary greatly from a measured teaspoon or tablespoon. If injecting medications, be certain you understand the correct dose and measurement.

Learn how to take or use your medication properly. Is it to be taken by mouth, inhaled, or injected? Is it to be applied to the skin, eye, or ear? Also, learn the best time to take you medication. Some medications are better to take in the morning

while others are better to take in the evening. Should the medication be taken with food, or on an empty stomach? Do you need to be careful of antacids, dairy products, iron tablets, vitamins, alcohol, or grapefruit juice with your medication?

The last element of learning about your medication is to understand the cost of the medication. If you have insurance, what tier does the medication fall into? Is there a generic available? Is there a lower cost alternative?

The second tip of safe medication use is to talk to your team of healthcare providers.

This includes your physicians, nurse practitioners, nutritionists, pharmacists, dentists, hygienists, and other caregivers. Talk to your team regarding the cost of your medications. Your physician may not know that the prescribed medication is in the most expensive tier under your specific health plan. Review side effects you may be experiencing. No matter how small the side effect may seem, a dose adjustment or even the time of day you take the medication may help. Also, talk to your team if you are having difficulty remembering to take your medication regularly.

Carry a medication wallet card with you so that your list of medications is handy. Remember to include all prescription, over-the-counter, vitamin, and herbal products you take. If you have a change in your medications, understand if the medication is an addition or in place of another medication. Lastly, you may want to make a list of questions to bring along to your next office visit. Write down the answers to your questions while at the office. Bring along a friend or relative if you think the information may be confusing.

The third tip for safe medication use is to take the medication properly.

Always double check the label and contents of the bottle. Is it the correct medication, for the right patient? Take your medications as part of your daily routine so that they are taken at the same time daily. Use a calendar or pill box as a reminder. Take the appropriate dose as prescribed. For example, antibiotics should be taken for the full course not just until you feel better. If a medication is to be taken daily, try not to half the dose or take it every other day in order to spread the time before a refill is needed. Lastly, never take medication in the dark. Be certain to read the label and look at the medication before taking the medication.

The fourth tip is to have a Medicine Check-Up at least once a year.

Have your physician, pharmacist, or MassMedLine review all your medications including, prescription, over the counter, vitamin, and herbal products, eye drops and creams as well. Some medications are not recommended to be taken by seniors due to increased risk of falls, or other side effects. Be certain to clean out your

medicine cabinet once a year and properly discard outdated products. Typically, it is not recommended to flush medications down the sink or toilet.

Our fifth and final tip is to keep all medicine out of sight and reach of children.

Be careful of handbags that may have medications in them. Be certain to keep these out of reach of young children. Also be aware of older children as well. Teach children about proper medication use, and not to take medications from others.

We encourage you to speak with one of our MassMedLine pharmacists to review questions you may have about the information provided, or questions regarding your specific medications. Also, if you have difficulty affording your medications, MassMedLine case managers are available to assist you.

References available upon request

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