

## MANAGING YOUR MEDICATIONS – FIVE ESSENTIAL STEPS



For many of us, medications can make a positive difference in the quality of our lives. Whether we use a medication to relieve a temporary condition, such as taking aspirin for a headache or antibiotics for an infection, or we use it to treat a chronic condition such as high blood pressure, a medication can be useful tool to help us to achieve our goals of engaging with life fully each day.

Medications become a problem when their use impacts us in a way that we hadn't expected and/or when the side effects or cumulative ("snowballing") effects of the medication begin to negatively impact our lives.

An example of the negative side of medications is the use of a drug for pain management. Anyone who has ever dealt with pain, especially long-term or chronic pain, knows about the unwanted effects of pain medications. Not only do pain medications have potential side effects such as heartburn and indigestion, dizziness and sleepiness, and constipation; many of them tend to work less effectively as time goes by. That means that not only do we have to deal with their side effects, we also get less relief from them and need to take more of them the longer that we use them.

While some side effects may be inevitable and even worth the relief that a certain medication can bring us, there are steps that we can take to insure that our medications are bringing the greatest benefit with the least ill effect.

**First, know exactly what your medication is for.** This may sound obviously simple but to my surprise, I often meet with people who will hand me a bucket of pills and tell me that they don't know what half of them are for. When a healthcare provider gives you a medication, make sure you know exactly what it's for. Knowing what it's for means knowing more than it's for "treating my stomach. " And this is where the next essential step comes in:

**Second, know exactly what your medication does.** This is different from knowing what it's for. While you may have received a prescription for your stomach, do you know what it does? I'm not saying that you need to know what the chemical interactions are, or how it acts on the chemistry of your body in detail. But there's a difference between a medicine for your stomach, which stops acid production, and a medication that prevents

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the acid in your stomach from irritating the stomach lining. When your healthcare provider hands you a prescription for a medication, ask her or him, "what is this for and how does it work?" Become actively engaged in your care by knowing about the medications that you're being given; it's your body that they're going into!

**Third;** now that you know what the medication is and how it works in your body, **make sure that you know about possible side effects of the medication.** I don't mean memorizing the entire list of potential side effects, because sometimes this list is enormous! What I'm suggesting here is that you familiarize yourself with the most common side effects and whether there's a need to be worried if they appear.

**Fourth is to know how other medications may interact with your medication.** As if side effects weren't enough to worry about, there are thousands of medications on the market that can increase or decrease the effect of the medication(s) that you're taking. In fact, sometimes even our healthcare providers don't know all of the interactions and side effects that can occur when two medications are taken together. There are some great sites that you can visit to find out this information (see links at the end of this article).

**Finally, know thyself!** How a medication works on your body may be different from the way that it works on others. In fact, you may experience something that few others experience. If you begin to take a medication, knowing some of the more common side effects, and you experience something that you weren't expecting, or that wasn't listed as a common effect, that doesn't necessarily mean that the medication isn't causing it. Notify your healthcare provider if you think that a medication that you're taking may be having an unexpected or serious effect on you.

This article isn't meant to overwhelm you, but is meant to guide you in creating habits that will help to insure that your medication is working for you. To help you with this process here are a few great links to resources that can provide you with accurate and essential information for you to manage your medications.

The National Institute's [MedlinePlus](#) is an excellent site for consumer advocacy. At this site, you can find out important information on many drugs, herbal remedies and supplements.

Another very good site, though at time technically more for healthcare providers than consumers, is [RxList](#). On this site, you can find out very detailed information on practically any medication that you may be taking. While there may be an overwhelming amount of information on the biochemical aspects of medicines, the sections on side effects and drug-interactions is great.

In time, I plan on updating the list of sites, organizations, and resources that will help you to manage your medications in a way that keeps you safe, gaining the greatest benefit from your medications. Please visit often and subscribe to this site if you'd like the latest updates on managing your healthcare.