Your doctors, nurses, and pharmacists work hard to keep you healthy, but you are also responsible. Learn what questions to ask. Expect answers — it’s your life and your health!

Unfortunately, medication errors happen. They happen in hospitals, in pharmacies, or even at home. And sometimes people get hurt because of these errors.

The more information you have, the better able you are to prevent errors and to take care of yourself. You have to ask your pharmacists, doctors, and nurses about your medicines; and you have to expect answers.

Remember, you are your best advocate. Use the lists below as guides of things you can do at your home, at the hospital, and at the doctor’s office to help keep you safe with your medicine.

### General Advice on Safe Medicine Use

- **Make a list of all the medicines you take.** Include the dose, how often you take the medicine, the name of your pharmacy, and the imprint code on the tablets or capsules. The imprint/code can help you identify a medicine.
- **Any time there is a change in your medicines update your list, too.** Double check the imprints/codes on the tablets and capsules using a “pill identifier tool” or the information on the prescription label.
- **Make a list of all the medicines you take and include any drug allergies.** Along with all prescription medicines, include any over-the-counter medicines, vitamins, nutritional supplements, or herbal products you take regularly.
- **Keep medicines in their original containers.** Many medicines look alike, so keeping them in their original containers will ensure you know which is which and how to take them.
- **Never take someone else’s medicine.** You don’t know if it will interact with the medicines you take if the dose may be wrong for you, or if you are allergic to it.
- **Read the label every time you take a dose of medicine to make sure you have the right drug and that you are following the instructions.**
- **Turn on the lights to take your medicines.** If you can’t see what you are taking, you may take the wrong thing.
- **Don’t store medicines in the bathroom medicine cabinet or in direct sunlight.** Humidity, heat, and light can affect the potency and safety of the medicine.
- **Store medicines where children cannot see or reach them, for example, in a locked box or high cabinet.**
- **Keep medicine for people separate from pets’ medicine or household chemicals.** Mix-ups can occur and can be dangerous for people and pets.
- **Don’t keep tubes of ointments or creams next to your tube of toothpaste.** They look and feel similar and can be easily mixed-up. Don’t chew, crush, break or open any capsules or tablets unless instructed. Some long-acting medicines are absorbed too quickly when chewed, which could be unsafe. Chewing, crushing, breaking, or opening medicine capsules or tablets could make it ineffective or could make you sick.
- **To give liquid medicine, use the measuring device that came with it.** Dosing errors can happen if you use a dosing cup that was for a different liquid medicine because the cups often are different sizes or have different markings. Also, household teaspoons and tablespoons are not accurate and should NEVER be used for measuring medicine. Your pharmacist should give you a special measuring device such as an oral syringe instead. If not, ask for one.

### What you can do at home

- **Turn over for additional safety tips**
What you can do at the hospital

- Take your medicine and your list of medicines with you when you go to the hospital. Your doctors, nurses, and pharmacists will need to know what you are taking at home.
- Once your medical team has reviewed everything, send your medicine home with your family. While you are in the hospital you may not need the same medicine. Tell your doctor and nurse you want to know the names of each medicine you receive and the reason you are taking it. That way, if you are given a different medicine, you will know to ask questions, which might prevent errors.
- Look at all of the medicines before you take them. If it doesn't look like what you usually take, ask why. It might be a generic version, or it might be the wrong medicine. Ask the same questions you would ask if you were in the pharmacy.
- Do not let anyone give you medicine without checking or scanning your hospital ID bracelet every time. This helps prevent you from getting someone else's medicines.
- Before any test or procedure, ask if it will require any dyes or medicines. Remind your nurse and doctor if you have allergies.
- When you are ready to go home, have the doctor, nurse, or pharmacist go over each medicine with you and a family member. Update your medicine list from home if any prescriptions change or if new medicines are added.

What you can do at the doctor's office

- Take your medicine list every time you go to your doctor's office, especially if you see more than one doctor. They might not know about the medicines other doctors prescribed for you.
- Ask your doctor to explain what is written on any prescription, including the medicine name and how often you should take it. Then when you take the prescription to the pharmacy, you can double check the information on the label.
- Tell your doctor you want the purpose for the medicine written on the prescription. Many medicine names look and sound alike. Knowing the purpose helps you and the pharmacist double check the prescription.
- If your doctor gives you samples, make sure that they check to be sure that there are no interactions with your other medicines. Pharmacies have computers to check for drug interactions and allergies, but when your doctor gives you samples, this important check may be missed.

Report a Medication Error
If you or a loved one have experienced a mistake with a medication or have a safety concern to share with others, we would like to hear from you. Visit us at: www.ConsumerMedSafety.org
Going to the hospital may be very stressful whether it is a planned visit or an unplanned visit. This may be due to not knowing what to expect, feeling like you do not have control over the situation, or having negative experience during a previous encounter. However, some of the tips listed below can help ease some of the stress you may have about going to the hospital.

**Bring a list of all the medicines you take.** Keep an accurate and updated list of all the medicines you take. Bring it with you to the hospital and share it with your doctors and nurses upon admission. Be sure your list includes prescription medicines, over-the-counter (OTC) products, herbals, vitamins, and dietary supplements. Also, include topical creams, ointments, medicines that are in pens or are patches, and eye and ear drops. Do not forget medicine(s) that you take on occasion or as needed (such as a rescue inhaler).

**Review your list with medicines you are given in the hospital.** Ask your doctor or nurse what medicines you are receiving while you are a patient. You may be given different medicines than what you normally take at home. Sometimes different medicines will be needed to help treat the medical reason for you being in the hospital. Also, some of the medicines you normally take at home may not be needed while you are in the hospital. Do not be afraid to ask about the medicines you are being given.

**Keep your patient identification band (ID) on.** Always make sure you are wearing your hospital ID brand. The ID band typically has your name, medical record number, and a barcode that has other important information about you. Healthcare workers will use your ID band to make sure they have the right person before a procedure is done or medicine is given to you. The nurse may scan the barcode on your ID band before giving you medicine. It is important to also state your name and your date of birth while your ID band is being checked.

**Make sure you are given the right medicine.** Any time you are given a medicine, the nurse should tell you the name of the drug, the dose, and what it is for (in general terms) before you take it. The medicine should be labeled when it is brought to you. It should also have a barcode on it that should be scanned to make sure it is the right medicine intended for you. If it is a new medicine or something you have never heard of, ask questions. If you received the medicine before and it looks different, do not be afraid to ask why it looks different. This will help prevent errors if the medicine somehow got mixed up.

**Call for the nurse if a medicine pump beeps.** Never attempt to turn off a pump or allow visitors to touch the pump. Doing so can cause the medicine to be given too fast, too slow, or stopped completely.
Do not let anyone press your pain pump button. Pain medicines are sometimes given through pumps (known as a PCA pump). The PCA pump is connected to tubing that goes directly into your vein. When you are in pain, you press the button on the PCA and a dose of medicine will go through the tubing into your vein. The button should only be pressed by you when you are in pain. Do not allow anyone else to press the button for you. If you are not in pain, you do not need to press the button. If other people press the button for you, you may receive too much pain medicine that can lead to an overdose.

Review your discharge instructions. You should receive discharge instructions and a list of medicines to take once you get home. If you were taking medicines before going to the hospital, check to see if you will be taking the same medicines once you get home. Sometimes the dose you previously were taking has changed, a new medicine was added, or a medicine you were taking before going to the hospital has been stopped. Make sure you understand which medicines you need to take and those that you need to stop taking. Also, find out when you received the last dose of medicine and when you need to start taking it. You may need to ask for new prescriptions so that you have the correct medicine and dose when you get home.

Bring an advocate. Some hospitalized patients are either unable to participate in their own care due to illness or some type of other physical limitation. If this occurs, try to arrange for a close friend or family member to stay with you. This individual can help you keep track of the medicines being administered to you during your hospital stay. They can also help confirm your identity before the nurse gives you any medicine.

Let the medical team know about any allergies and the type of reaction(s) you have. Your medical team will need to know if you have any allergies to medicines and what type of reaction you have. Sometimes people confuse side effects as allergy to medicine. For example, some medicines may make you feel sick to your stomach especially if you have not eaten anything. So, your medical team can make sure it is a true allergy. In addition, let your medical team know if you are allergic to food, latex, intravenous dye (may be used during special tests), and so on, and what type of reaction you have. It is important to keep a list of all your allergies with your list of medicines.

Discuss alcohol and other substance use. Your doctors and nurses will ask you whether you drink alcohol or use any substances, such as marijuana, or prescription medicines that have not been prescribed to you. This information will remain confidential. However, it is important for your overall care. In addition, you should tell your doctors if you have been taking more than the prescribed amount medicine. For example, if you are taking larger doses of pain medicine or taking it more frequently, and how long you have been taking more of it. Higher doses of medicine, and the use of alcohol and other drugs may interfere with the medicines you will be receiving during your hospital stay.