

Your Pharmacist: A Partner in Drug Safety

Medicines improve the quality of life for millions of people, but they can also pose serious risks, particularly if not taken correctly. Your pharmacist, as a member of your health care team, is uniquely able to help you get the benefits of medicine while reducing risks as much as possible. By choosing a pharmacist whom you trust, just as you would choose a doctor, you can build a long-term partnership for good health.

In recent years, the role of pharmacists has grown and changed to help patients cope with a complicated health care system. Pharmacists do much more than count out pills and pour liquids to fill prescriptions. Every pharmacist has undergone extensive education in the science of how the human body uses and responds to medicines, and has also built up years of experience in real-life counseling on how to take medicines safely.

Pharmacists are medication experts, checking each prescription to help ensure that:

- The information provided by the prescriber is complete.
- The new medication will not interact with anything else they know you are taking.
- The medication and dosage are safe with any medical conditions that they are aware you may have.
- You understand how to take and store the medication properly.

In addition, pharmacists can play a valuable role in helping to manage your overall health care. Often, patients receive care (and prescriptions) from multiple health professionals in several locations; your pharmacist can serve as a vital link in communication and safety oversight among all the members of your care team. If possible, use the same pharmacy for all your prescription services. Having your medication records all in one place lets your pharmacist check for possible interactions or risks, and cuts the chances of duplicating medicine.

Finally, your pharmacist is a resource and an educator for you and your family. He or she can answer many of your questions about your health and medicines. By getting to know you and your medication profile, your pharmacist can:

- Warn you of possible harmful drug interactions or allergies.
- Tell you about potential side effects.
- Advise you on foods, drinks, or activities to avoid while taking a certain medication, or on what to do if you miss a dose.
- Tell you when a concern you've raised requires a call to your doctor.



Your Pharmacist: A Partner in Drug Safety (cont'd)

Here are some ways to make the most of your pharmacist's expertise:

Find out when to self-treat, and when to call your doctor. Your pharmacist may be able to help you decide whether to treat a minor problem with nonprescription medication, or to consult with your doctor or other health care professional.

Know the facts about your medicines. The pharmacist can clarify anything you forgot to ask your doctor or still don't understand. Key questions include: What is this medication supposed to do? What are the possible side effects? Should I take all of it even if I feel better? Should I renew the prescription after I use it up?

Share an up-to-date list of all your medications with your pharmacist, doctor, and other members of your health care team. Include everything you take, including nonprescription medications, herbal or natural remedies, and vitamins and supplements. And if you are using multiple pharmacies, it is particularly important to make all your pharmacists aware of this.

Tell your doctor and pharmacist about any known allergies to medications. They can advise you about other types of medication that might cause a similar problem.

Share your medical history, too. Some medications are not appropriate for people with certain conditions or diseases. When your pharmacist knows your medical history, he or she can add another safety check to your treatment regimen.

Ask your pharmacist before taking nonprescription medicines. They don't require a prescription, but nonprescription medications contain active ingredients that can interact with some prescription medications or cause harm to people with certain health conditions.

- Read the "Drug Facts" label carefully before buying or taking any nonprescription medication, especially the dosage and warnings.
- Use nonprescription products only for minor health problems on a short-term basis, unless your doctor tells you otherwise.
- Consult your pharmacist or a doctor if you develop any side effects from nonprescription medicine, if your symptoms don't improve, or if they get worse. In case of a medical emergency, seek immediate medical attention.

Listen to the pharmacist's advice. Your counseling may take place in a rushed or busy setting, or when you don't feel well. Try to focus, and call back later if you can't remember. If you have trouble hearing or understanding English, or if you have memory problems, tell your pharmacist. Two things can help you remember instructions:

- Write down what you are told.
- Repeat what you hear so your pharmacist knows you understand, for instance, "Three times a day, with food," or "At bedtime."



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Read all of the printed information that your pharmacist provides with your prescription medicines, such as:

- Consumer Medication Information (CMI), produced by the pharmacy.
- Medication Guides (MGs)—required by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) for some medicines.
- Information for Patients/Patient Counseling Information that may form part of the professional Prescribing Information (PI).
- Patient Package Inserts (PPIs)—FDA-required for oral contraceptives and products containing estrogen; voluntarily produced by pharmaceutical companies for many other types of medicines.
- The label affixed to the medication container, as shown below.

The Rx number is a reference for you to reorder medication. Make sure that this number matches the same number on a previous refill.

When filling a prescription, be sure to check your name and address to make sure you are receiving the medicine that is meant for you.

Be sure to check that you understand the dosing instructions before you leave the pharmacy. If necessary, discuss them with the pharmacist to be sure you understand them.

If you run out of medication prior to the time for refill, or if you have medication left over, you may not be following the dosing regimen correctly, so bring this to the attention of your pharmacist.

The prescribing physician's name is always included on the label.

Additional warning and instruction labels for use may be affixed to the prescription bottle. Be sure to read and follow these warnings.

The pharmacy name, address, and phone number are included on the label to remind you where you filled a prescription and how to contact the pharmacy should you have any questions about your medicine.

Check the name of the medicine and dosage against a previous refill to insure that you have the correct medication.

This shows how many refills you have left on a prescription. If the label says "0" refills and your doctor said you would be continuing therapy, you may need to contact your physician for a new prescription in advance of your last doses to avoid a delay in getting your prescription filled.

Always safely discard any left over medications that you are no longer using, as well as any medicines that are out of date.

Ask your pharmacist if you're uncertain about anything:

- Is this the medication the doctor prescribed?
- What do the symbols on these warning labels mean?
- Something about this medication isn't what I expected (the name, amount, formula, or dosage), or seems different from other times I've taken this medication.



Choosing a pharmacy: Options and trade-offs

If you have a prescription insurance plan, your prime concern may be finding a pharmacy or network that will allow you to be reimbursed for your medicines. Your choices may include traditional independent “walk-up” pharmacies, chain drug stores or supermarkets with pharmacy departments, or mail-order services. Other considerations are convenience (location, availability of delivery, help with insurance paperwork), service (including wait times and the availability of a pharmacist to counsel you), and price.

Affording your medications: Help is available

The cost of prescription medication is a pressing concern for health care consumers today. It may be particularly worrisome to older adults who must take multiple medications and live on a fixed income.

- Ask your doctor or pharmacist about drug benefits that may be available to people in your age or income range.
- Advocate for yourself when dealing with a prescription insurance plan company. Take notes, ask questions, write down answers, and ask for your health care team’s help if you are having difficulty getting reimbursed for a medicine that has been prescribed for you.
- You should not skip doses or split pills to save money on your medications; with some kinds of medicine, this can cause harm. Ask your pharmacist or doctor if there are less costly options for treatment and how they may differ.
- Check the websites of the companies that make your medicines.

Pharmaceutical companies have developed extensive programs to help people access the medicines they need, and one of these programs may be appropriate for you.

- For help in finding a patient assistance program in the United States, go to www.pparx.org or www.pfizerhelpfulanswers.com.

Protect Yourself Against Counterfeit Medicines

Around the world, counterfeit prescription drugs are a growing problem. A counterfeit medicine is one that appears the same as the authentic product but is manufactured and distributed by criminal organizations. These products may contain incorrect ingredients or even dangerous contaminants, the wrong amounts of active ingredients, or no active ingredient at all. The United States has a prescription medicine distribution system that is generally considered to be among the safest in the world, and so far, the problem of counterfeit medicine has been limited there. But the threat should not be ignored. For more information, see http://www.pfizer.com/products/counterfeit_and_importation/counterfeit_importation.jsp.

It’s often difficult or impossible to tell if a product is counterfeit by looking at the medication or its packaging, but there are things you can do:

- Closely scrutinize the appearance of your medicine and its packaging.
- Talk to your pharmacist if your medication seems different in any way than before (shape, taste, smell, color), is packaged differently, or doesn’t produce the effects you expect.

Consumers may not know that the medicines they’ve purchased are counterfeits. That’s why it’s important to purchase prescription products only from a reputable pharmacy and pharmacist with whom you’re familiar. According to the International Medical Products Anti-Counterfeiting Task Force, more than 50% of medicines bought on the Internet from sites that conceal their actual physical address are counterfeit. To find an approved Internet pharmacy, go to www.nabp.net.