

Taking Medicines Safely as You Age



Using prescription medicine is common as we age. Older adults are more likely to develop chronic health conditions or risk factors that benefit from treatment—such as diabetes, high blood pressure, osteoporosis, high cholesterol, or heart problems.

In fact, **nine out of 10 older adults take prescription medicine**, and **more than half are on four or more medicines**, reports KFF.

Our bodies change as we age. So does the way our bodies respond to medications.

Older adults may be more likely to have side effects from medicines. They may also be at higher risk for drug interactions, in which one medicine affects how another medicine works. **Paying attention to special tips can help you take medicines safely:**

- 1** Before starting a new medicine, make sure your doctor knows everything you are taking.
- 2** Keep and share a list of any drug allergies.
- 3** Go over timing and instructions and ask any questions you have. Examples: How often should you take it? Should you take the medicine with food or not? Can you drive? What should you do if you have any side effects?
- 4** Keep your medicines organized and use a system to keep track of your schedule. Some people make a list and check it off. Some people use a phone app. Some people use a pill box organizer. Do whatever works best for you.
- 5** Stick to the schedule, and talk to your doctor before stopping a medicine.
- 6** If you go to the hospital or other medical facility, bring your medication list with you.

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Common Questions

Is there a form I can use to track medicines?

Yes, you can download a worksheet called *Managing Medications and Supplements* from www.nia.nih.gov/health/caregiver-worksheets.

Are you taking too many medicines?

Medline Plus cautions that some older adults, especially those who see multiple doctors, could be taking medicine they do not need. Being on multiple medications is called “polypharmacy,” which can carry risks. Healthcare professionals are trained to review your prescriptions to be sure everything is on track for you.

Do supplements count as medicines?

Yes. Even vitamins, herbs, and other supplements labeled as “natural” can sometimes be unsafe. Some can interact with medicines you’re taking. Supplements are not regulated the way medications are. “Just because a dietary supplement is on a store shelf, that does not mean it is safe, does what the label says it will, or contains what the label states,” says the National Institute on Aging. Best advice? Check with your doctor first.



Sources: KFF (2019). *Data Note: Prescription Drugs and Older Adults*. KFF.org | Medline Plus. *Taking multiple medicines safely*. medlineplus.gov
National Institute on Aging. *Dietary Supplements for Older Adults*. www.nia.nih.gov | National Institute on Aging. *Taking Medicines Safely as You Age*. www.nia.nih.gov

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