

Feature Article

Helping Your Independent Older Parents Use Medicines Safely

Do your older parents use one or more medicines? Many older Americans do, and with the help of their prescription medications they live longer, healthier lives. Yet because older people often need more medicines than other age groups, they also have a greater potential for adverse reactions to their medicines.

Many adult children who are caregivers for frail parents have primary responsibility for administering medicines. Yet even active older adults who care for themselves may need help in taking medicines safely and appropriately. Here are some ideas from the **National Council on Patient Information and Education (NCPPIE)**, for helping parents who are not in your care to make good use of their medicines. The time you take now can help your parents stay independent longer.

Talk to Your Parents About Their Medicines. Find Out:

1. What medicines they take and for what conditions.
2. How often they take the medicines and how they take them.
3. If they feel the medicine is helping.
4. If they have fallen more often, been more groggy or sleepy, or been less hungry since taking the medicine.
5. If they have any problems in taking them, such as forgetting a dose, being unable to tell the pills apart, having annoying side effects from the medicine.
6. If they feel they have enough information or instructions for taking the medicine.

Work with Your Parents to Solve Problems

Encourage them to talk to their physician or pharmacist to get information they need and to tell the doctor about other medicines they are already taking. Let them know that they are not “bothering” the professional by asking questions.

You might offer to go with them to their next visit to help pose questions your parent can write down in advance, and possibly send the physician before a visit to signal the need to allow time for discussion.

Discuss the importance of working with their health professionals and not making decisions about medicines alone. Suddenly stopping some medicines can be very dangerous, for example. It is even important to tell the physician about over-the-counter medicines (e.g., laxatives and aspirin), drinking beer or wine, and smoking. Often, people don't realize these things can interfere with medicine.

Understand that medications can interact with other medications, vitamins, herbal supplements,

foods, and alcoholic beverages. Therefore, it is important for your parents to ask the doctor about potential side effects and interactions for each medication prescribed.

Suggest that they ask their health professionals about memory aids such as timers, clever medicine packaging, and medicine calendars. Many of these are available at the pharmacy.

Recommend that your parents go to one pharmacy that maintains customer medication records to obtain all their prescription medicines. Such records can help avoid a drug interaction or remind your parent to renew a needed prescription.

If your parents have vision problems or difficulty with written English, suggest color-coding each prescription bottle and putting the same colors on a chart that gives directions for using each different medicine they take. Suggest that they ask the pharmacist for large print labels. Ask your parents' pharmacist to dispense their medications with non-child proof caps.

Watch for Side Effects or Adverse Reactions

Many times people mistake undesirable effects of medicine for the “natural” effects of aging. Consider the possibility that any of the following may be caused by medication:

- Agitation or anxiety
- Confusion or memory loss
- Fatigue
- Decreased sexual drive
- Depression
- Weakness
- Fainting or black outs

Sometimes older parents are reluctant to tell their children if they are having problems such as dizziness, which may be related to their medicines. Dizziness can lead to falls. Be sure to observe if your parents have bruises or discolorations on their body. This could be a sign of falling due to an adverse medicine reaction.

If you suspect an adverse drug reaction, talk to your parent about consulting his or her physician. Bring it to the physician's attention yourself, if necessary. Talk to your parents about the importance of seeing the physician every 3 to 6 months for a check-up when they are on long-term therapy. Suggest that they ask the physician if their medicines are still necessary.

Work With Your Parents in Finding Outside Help When Needed

Many services are available that can be useful in assisting medication-taking for older people. Suggest that your parent talk (or talk yourself) to the local Area Agency on Aging, Social Services Department, Visiting Nurses Association, or the American Society of Consultant Pharmacists (ASCP) to find out about:

- A formal, in-home evaluation by health professionals of medication status and needs.
- Regular telephone contacts by volunteers (who could help remind about and monitor medicine-taking and reinforce positive habits).
- Periodic home visits by health professionals to monitor progress, give advice, or teach skills related to medicine use.
- Classes in the community that teach older adults to coordinate their own care and manage their medicines wisely.

Don't Take Responsibility for Your Parents' Medicine Use If You Don't Need To

As long as your parents are not confused or forgetful, it is healthy for them to stay in charge of their own lives. They may welcome your interest and assistance if you let them know that your role is supportive. Look for natural ways to bring up the medicine issue, and be diplomatic. Just like supporting a loved one in losing weight or giving up smoking, it is important not to nag, demean, or criticize your parents about their use of medicines. A positive approach works best.

Source: **MUST for Seniors™** NCPIE 2010.

For more information about safe medicine use, fact sheets and tools to help keep track of your medicines, please visit www.mustforseniors.org. The **Medication Use Safety Training for Seniors Program™** (MUST for Seniors™) is a national education campaign to improve medicine communication, promote safe and appropriate medicine use.

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