

# Safe and Sound: Preventing Medication Mishaps



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With the aging of the population, healthier living conditions, and the fruits of scientific research allowing all of us to live longer, our use of prescription medications is only going to increase. Following these simple rules can help you prevent problems caused by interactions between medications, vitamins, supplements, and foods. It is one more way that you can be a good steward of your loved one's health. It is also a good example of what it means to be a proactive family caregiver. And while you are following these steps to protect your loved one's health, consider following them for yourself as well. Remember, your own good health is essential to your being an effective family caregiver.

As family caregivers we play a significant role in ensuring our loved ones' safety as they interact with healthcare providers. We monitor their well-being and report symptoms. We advocate for their rights to treatment, and we manage their medications. And there are so many medications!

Chronically ill or disabled people take more medications than any other group of individuals. They see more doctors as well, each one focused on a different condition. Unfortunately, our loved ones' doctors don't usually talk to each other, so they are unfamiliar with the full list of drugs that have been prescribed. That being the case, it isn't surprising that adverse events from medication interactions are the leading cause of visits to the ER. That's scary news, but there are some fairly easy things that you can do to prevent medication mishaps.

## 1. Maintain an Up-to-date List

First and foremost, maintain an up-to-date list of everything your loved one takes. List medications

prescribed by doctors, but also list those purchased without a prescription such as aspirin, vitamins, and herbal supplements. These over-the-counter "meds" can at times interact with prescription drugs and create serious problems. You are probably the only one who knows all the medications your loved one is taking, especially if he/she sees multiple physicians.

- Be sure to list the name, dosage, and frequency of the medication (e.g., Warfarin 4mg, once a day), the reason for taking it, (blood clot prevention), any dosing directions (may be taken with or without food), and the start date. For prescription drugs add the name and number of the prescribing doctor, and the name and number of the pharmacy that fulfilled the prescription.
- Be sure to put your loved one's name at the top of the document and include your contact information (or someone else's) as the person to call in an emergency.
- Note any allergies or intolerances, or other significant medical information that might not be obvious.
- Make multiple copies, one for you to carry and one for your loved one's personal medical file. Keep one on the "frig" for paramedics to find, and send a copy to your loved one's primary doctor.
- It is critical that you keep this record updated. Not only will an outdated record not do any good, but it may actually do some harm. A simple computer-based document you create yourself is one of the easiest ways to keep the record current.



## **2. “Translate” Hand-written Prescriptions**

We all know that doctors are notorious for having hard-to-read handwriting. For that reason don't be shy about asking all your loved one's doctors to “translate” their handwriting so you can write down exactly what a prescribed medication is, its name, dosage, etc.

## **3. Write the Condition Treated on Each Medicine Bottle**

On each medicine bottle, write down the name of the condition it treats. You might find that your loved one is taking three different pills for the same condition, each prescribed by a different physician. That may be exactly what is needed, but it is definitely a red flag to alert you to ask questions.

## **4. Use the Same Pharmacy**

Try to use the same pharmacy for all prescriptions. That way there will be an official record of all your loved one's prescription medications over an extended period of time.

## **5. Understand Potential Side Effects and Interactions**

When your loved one is prescribed a new medication, ask the doctor and pharmacist about potential side effects and interactions with others drugs, vitamins, or foods. But don't stop there. You can check for side effects and interactions at [www.drugdigest.com](http://www.drugdigest.com). If you get conflicting information start asking questions. Monitor your loved one for reactions and, at the first sign of trouble, call the doctor and report the specific symptoms you see.

A sample Medication Record and Crisis Symptom Reporting check List can both be found on the NFCA web site at: [www.thefamilycaregiver.org/caregiving\\_resources/tips\\_and\\_tools.cfm](http://www.thefamilycaregiver.org/caregiving_resources/tips_and_tools.cfm).