

# Managing Medications

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**E**ven individuals who have no signs of ill health can take many prescribed and over-the-counter medications to treat common conditions such as arthritis pain, high blood pressure, high cholesterol, and acid reflux. As people age and develop chronic diseases, the list of medications frequently grows long. But regardless of the number of medications a person takes, adverse side effects are always possible, and the risks increase dramatically as the number of medications rises.

While adverse reactions to medications occur frequently, noncompliance with prescribed medication regimens is probably even more common. Studies

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have shown that as many as 50 percent of patients fail to take their medications as prescribed. The problem is even greater for older adults, in large part because they are likely to have multiple

chronic diseases and thus are prescribed many medications.

Numerous factors contribute to the high incidence of noncompliance, and many can be traced to communication problems between patients and their health care providers. Often, patients do not understand why a certain medication has been prescribed. They may not understand its use and benefits and may be unaware of the risks of not taking the medication as prescribed. Unpleasant side effects also can lead to noncompliance. Frequently, patients who experience unpleasant side effects stop taking the medication without informing their health care provider. Noncompliance also increases as the number of medications prescribed increases. Because elderly persons take an average of five to seven medications, it is not surprising that many have difficulty organizing all of

their medications as prescribed. Finally, noncompliance can be related to economic status. Some medications are expensive, and individuals with limited financial resources may be forced to choose between buying a prescribed medicine and purchasing another needed product or service.

## **The Risks of Ignoring Information on Medication Management**

The most serious danger of failing to take a medication as instructed is that the disorder or condition for which it is prescribed will not be well controlled, and thus an individual will be at risk of developing more serious medical problems. For example, people who have high blood pressure and fail to take their antihypertensive medications on a regular basis are increasing their chances of having a heart attack or a stroke. Another danger is that if people take some medications improperly, they may develop new medical problems, such as mental confusion or injuries sustained from a fall due to an imbalance related to adverse effects on brain function. Finally, even if one takes medications as prescribed, adverse drug reactions may still occur. Therefore, it is important for patients to understand the most frequent symptoms to watch for when starting a new medication and to always investigate with their health care provider or pharmacist whether new symptoms might be related to the medication they are taking.



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