

Taking Medication Safely

There is no medication to prevent or cure Alzheimer's disease, but a number of drugs are used to treat Alzheimer symptoms. Physicians may also prescribe drugs to manage delusions and hallucinations, depression, agitation or sleeplessness.

Although these medications can help manage symptoms, they can also produce side effects such as agitation, dry mouth, drowsiness, tremors, falling or constipation. What's more, some medications can contribute to the person's problems and make some symptoms even worse. For example, a person who begins taking drugs for high blood pressure or a heart problem might appear to be more confused than before he or she began taking the drugs.

As a caregiver, you need to understand the use of medications, and be alert to possible overmedication and adverse reactions. To understand the effects of medications and how to manage their use, consider the following tips.

Get medical advice

Be cautious about giving any medication, whether it's an over-the-counter or prescription drugs.

- Begin by asking your physician to review all medication to check for possible drug interactions.
- Make sure that every physician involved with the person's care knows about all prescribed medications.
- Find out as much as possible about every medication, including name, purpose, dosage, frequency and possible side effects. If serious side effects occur, report them to the physician.

Be prudent

Use common sense when administering or obtaining medication.

- Under no circumstances should you change dosages without first consulting the physician.
- Avoid the temptation to over report symptoms in order to persuade your physician to prescribe a new drug or to increase the person's dosage.
- Do not share medications with other caregivers or save the bottles of old prescriptions.

Rely on your pharmacist for information

Pharmacists can be another information source. Your local pharmacist can also check for interaction between drugs. But keep in mind that pharmacists can neither prescribe drugs nor alter drug dosages.

Maintain accurate and ongoing records

Keep a written record of all current medications, including the name of the medication, dosage and starting date, and carry a copy of this list with you in your wallet or purse at all times. This record will be invaluable in the event of a serious drug interaction or overdose.

Be candid and direct

In clear, simple language help the individual understand the kinds of medications he or she is taking and why. In addition, offer clear instructions such as these: “Here’s the pill for your high blood pressure. Put it in your mouth and drink some water.”

Develop a routine for giving the medication

Giving medications in a specific way at specific times of the day or evening will help reduce conflicts. However, if the person refuses to take the medication, stop and try again later.

- Never assume the individual will take medications on his or her own. It may be necessary to check and see whether the medicine has been swallowed.
- At some point, you may need to assume responsibility for giving the person medications.

Stay organized

Separating pills into a plastic container with small compartments labeled “day” and “evening” or “Monday,” “Tuesday,” “Wednesday,” etc., will help track medications.

- Some caregivers find it useful to give medications in individual cups or envelopes or to keep a calendar and check off each dose as it’s taken.

Adapt to the person

If the person has problems swallowing pills or spits out the pills, ask your physician if the medication is available in some other form, such as a liquid.

Some medications can be crushed and mixed with food. However, no pill or tablet should be crushed without first consulting your physician or pharmacist. Crushing some medications may cause them to be ineffective or unsafe.

Take safety precautions

Put a lock on the medicine cabinet or place the medications in a locked drawer. If the person spits out pills, make sure these pills aren’t picked up and eaten by children or pets.

- Avoid leaving the person alone with medication bottles in the room. Be sure to throw out all old medicines.

Be prepared for emergencies

Research the names and telephone numbers of pharmacies or other services that deliver medications. Also find out the names of pharmacies that are open on Sundays and weekends.

- Keep the number of your local poison control center or emergency room handy.
- If you suspect a medication overdose, call poison control or 911 before taking any action.

The Alzheimer’s Association is the leading voluntary health organization in Alzheimer care, support and research.

Updated July 2007