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 Brought to you by the American Society of Health-System Pharmacists
Pharmacists helping people make the best use of medication

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Medications and You

Pharmacist Q & A

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1) What basic items should be stored in a well-stocked medicine cabinet?

Your doctor or pharmacist may recommend that you keep **activated charcoal**--an antidote for certain poisonings--on hand. You should have **antiseptics** and **first-aid ointments** to treat cuts and scrapes. **Dressings** such as assorted bandage sizes are critical. **Thermometers**, **antihistamines**, and **emergency numbers** for local police, fire and rescue personnel as well as your local poison control center are also important. A new national hotline (**800-222-1222**) will connect you to your local poison control center.

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2) I've heard that you should pay attention to the expiration date on your prescription medication. Is that true?

Yes. Expired medicines often don't work as well, and they can even be harmful. To make sure that you don't accidentally take an out-of-date medication, you should clean out your medicine cabinet every year, throwing away:

- Any medication that has changed color or formed a residue,
- Aspirin or acetaminophen that is crumbly or smells strange,
- Hydrogen peroxide that no longer bubbles when applied as a disinfectant, and
- Eye drops that have expired.

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3) Does it make a difference where medicines are stored in my

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house?

Yes, it does. For instance, prescription medications should never be stored in a bathroom because heat and humidity can change the drug's chemical stability. Most medicines should be stored in a childproof area and kept at room temperature and away from sunlight. Some medications, however, must be refrigerated. Check with your pharmacist or doctor if you are not sure.

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4) How can I avoid taking too much prescription medicine?

Medications are prescribed in specific dosages to account for:

- Age,
- Weight, and
- The minimum amount needed to treat a condition vs. the maximum amount that might result in harm or unwanted side effects.

The most important thing to remember when taking either prescription or non-prescription medications is to follow the dosage recommendations of your doctor or pharmacist. Today's drugs are very complex, and the dosages tend to be precise for your needs. Either underdosing or overdosing can be harmful. This is why you should never share your medications with anyone else.

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5) What should I drink when I take my medications?

Certain foods, beverages, alcohol, caffeine, and even cigarettes can interact with medicines. Generally, water is the best liquid to drink when taking a medication. However, there are exceptions to this rule.

For example, because certain types of aspirin can cause stomach upset, you may tolerate them better if you take them with milk. Certain medications may be absorbed into the body better when ingested with food. Talk to your doctor or pharmacist for more specific information.

Here are some examples of potentially harmful interactions between medications and food or drink:

- Drinking alcohol when taking an antihistamine (can cause increased drowsiness),
- Drinking alcohol when taking an aspirin or acetaminophen product for pain (can damage the liver),
- Drinking caffeinated beverages when using inhalers for bronchial asthma, chronic bronchitis, or emphysema (these types of inhalers and caffeine both stimulate the nervous system), and
- Eating food with certain blood pressure medications (food can sometimes decrease absorption)

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6) How do I know if a nonprescription medication is working?

If your illness (i.e., fever, cough, or body ache) doesn't get better in three to five days, you should seek additional medical care. Over-the-counter (nonprescription) drugs are meant to treat only the most minor health problems.

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7) How can my pharmacist help me with my medication questions?

Patients need to work with their health care providers-including pharmacists-to make sure they receive the most benefit from their medicines. Keep a list of all prescription and non-prescription medicine and alternative medicines or dietary supplements you may be taking. Share that list with your doctor or pharmacist.

And don't forget that if you're ever a patient in a hospital or health system, you can always ask to speak to the pharmacist if you have medication questions. Working together, we can make sure that you receive the best treatment possible.

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