

Making sure we're wise about medicines

Self Care health facts column

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Generally medicines work very well; but they only work well if we take them in the most appropriate way. They have the ability to provide us with enormous benefit; they are used to both treat and prevent disease; they increase life expectancy and improve quality of life. However, if not used correctly they can be not only ineffective but also cause harm.

Be Medicinewise Week, now in its third year, aims to help us make safer and more informed decisions about our medicines and about our health more generally. This year, *Be Medicinewise Week* has focussed on Australia's ageing population.

This initiative is coordinated by the National Prescribing Service – now known as NPS Medicinewise - an independent, not-for-profit organisation committed to providing up-to date, evidenced-based information and advice about medicines, health conditions and medical tests.

Medication misadventure is estimated to be responsible for up to a third of all unplanned hospital admissions among older Australians. According to NPS Medicinewise CEO, Dr Lynn Weekes, half of these problems with medicines could be prevented. These emergency admissions are related to the incorrect use of medicines – too much, too little, interactions or side effects.



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Also, research has consistently shown that people with long-term medical conditions very often do not take their medicines as prescribed.

This so-called non-adherence is sometimes deliberate. Many people choose to discontinue therapy (or even not to begin in the first place) perhaps because of a lack of understanding of their disease, a lack of belief in the benefit of their treatment, apprehension about side effects, financial barriers and even a poor doctor/patient relationship.

Nevertheless, there are also many of us who are unintentionally non-adherent. And whether deliberate or not, we do know that non-adherence is associated with poorer health outcomes.

Talk to your pharmacist if you are concerned about your medicines. If you want to stop taking a medicine, check with your pharmacist or doctor first. If you start a new medicine (prescription or complementary) inform all the doctors in your healthcare team and your pharmacist. If you select a non-prescription medicine from your local pharmacy, make sure you tell the pharmacist or pharmacy assistant about any other medicines you are taking.

The more medicines you take, the more difficult it is to remember important information about them. A "medicines list" (it could be paper based or computer based) is a useful way to keep a record of all important information about your medicines. The list might also remind you of questions to ask your doctor or pharmacist whenever you are prescribed a new medicine – questions such as:

- What is the drug name and the brand name of this medicine?
- How does this medicine work and how will I know if it is effective?
- Is it important to take this medicine before or after food?

- What side effects should I be aware of and what should I do if they occur?
- What do I do if I miss a dose and if this happens too often, how can I better remember to take my tablets?
- Will this medicine interact with other medicines I use?
- Are all complementary medicines safe to take with this medicine, and
- Can I drink alcohol while using this medicine?

Remember Consumer Medicines Information (CMI) is available for all prescription medicines. Your pharmacist can print the CMI from his or her computer if it isn't already included in the packet or with the bottle of medicine.

And your pharmacist can make you a personalised list of all your medicines with their names, the recommended dose and how they work. Pharmacies around Australia providing the Pharmaceutical Society's Self Care health information can give you more details. For the nearest location, phone 1300 369 772 or log onto the website www.psa.org.au.