

Church Name

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## ASSISTING OLDER ADULTS WITH MEDICATIONS

Although medications provide indispensable treatment for the many chronic diseases from which older adults suffer, if taken incorrectly, they can do more harm than good. Studies have shown that the majority of older adults do not take their medications correctly. Adverse effects of medications are one of the primary reasons for older adults being hospitalized. Older adults frequently take many medications, an average of eight/day. (This is called polypharmacy.) Older adults' bodies have a reduced ability to process and eliminate the medications because of a decreased stomach acids and slower intestinal, liver and kidney function. All of these factors point out the importance of monitoring how well the older adult is managing his/her medications and what effect they are having.

If the older adult manages his/her own medications, question him/her frequently about the medications he/she is taking to try to assess the ability to self-medicate. Consult with the physician if you have any questions about the accuracy of his/her medication self-administration.

### **These conditions may make it difficult for the older adult to safely manage his/her medications independently:**

- Memory loss, making it likely that doses of medications are forgotten, and making any medication regimen, but especially a complex one, confusing.
- Impaired finger dexterity, making it difficult to pick up one pill at a time.
- Impaired vision, making labels hard to read and differences between pills hard to detect.
- Impaired mobility, making trips to the pharmacy difficult.

### **The following are some possible ways to assist older adults with maintaining the ability to correctly take their medications.**

- Provide a written list, detailing what is taken and when. You may find making multiple copies of this list works best so the older adult can check off each medication dose, as taken.
- Ask him/her to tear off each day's page of a daily calendar after medications are taken. This works best with only one daily dose of medications.
- Prepare medications a week at a time by setting them up in medication strips. Strips are available for once a day dosing or for multiple daily doses and can be purchased at most drug stores.
- Ask the pharmacy to provide non-child proof caps for the medication bottles. Large print medications labels may also be requested.
- Automatic medication dispensing machines are available. Although they are expensive, if they help to keep the older adult independent and healthy, the cost may be worth the benefit.

### **If you find it necessary to supervise the older adult's medications, follow these tips to assure that medications are taken properly:**

- Keep a list of the older adult's medications and show it to every physician he/she sees. The list should include, in addition to drug allergies and medications causing significant side effects, the following information for each medication:
  - Both the brand name and the generic name. Include over-the-counter medications and herbal remedies on this list—these can interact with prescription medications.
  - The reason the medication is taken.
  - Start and end dates.
  - Dosage, number of times taken per day, and time of day taken.
- When the older adult's physician orders a new medication, ask him/her these questions:
  - "What is it for?" "What effects are expected/desired?"
  - "How often should it be taken?" "At what time of day should the medication be taken?" "With or without food?"
  - "For how long should it be taken?" "How many times should it be refilled?"
  - "What side effects should I be watchful for?" "Which of these should be reported?" "Are there any side effects that would necessitate immediately discontinuing of the medication?" (OVER)

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[www.fcntc.org](http://www.fcntc.org)

- “Are there any interactions I should be aware of, e.g., to certain foods or alcohol, or is exposure to sun a problem with this medication?”
- “Are there special instructions for storage of the medication?”
- “Will this replace a medication currently being taken?”

(Also share with the physician concern over the affordability of medications. Older, cheaper medications sometimes work as well and in most cases, generic forms of medications, while cheaper, are equally effective. Sometimes the physician will provide samples, at least until the effectiveness of the new medication is established.)

- Fill the older adult’s prescriptions at only one pharmacy. If all the older adult’s medications are in one pharmacy data base, the software will provide alerts regarding possible interactions between medications. Do not hesitate to ask the pharmacist questions about medications. He/she is an excellent resource.

#### **Suggestions for safe use of medications:**

- Discard old medications unless the physician has indicated that he might restart them. Even then, discard when the medication has expired.
- Many medications interact with alcohol. Ask your pharmacist.
- The older adult should never share medications with someone else.
- Take each medication exactly as prescribed. If a problem results, let the physician know. Do not just stop the medication or reduce the dose without informing him/her. Some medications are dangerous if abruptly discontinued.
- Store medications in a cool, dry place—not in the medication cabinet since bathrooms can be warm and humid.
- Be familiar with the appearance of each medication. Ask your pharmacist to inform you when a different generic form is dispensed. Also, if the pill looks different because of the generic form dispensed, the label should identify the pill by color and markings. If the label identifiers do not match the pills in the bottle, take it back to the pharmacy for clarification.
- Do not store medications in containers other than the original bottle. This refers to the main supply of medications and not to those that are set-up in weekly medication strips.
- It is recommended that the older adult wear a medical alert bracelet if taking blood thinners, heart medications, or medications for seizures or diabetes.
- If you feel you must order medications on the internet to reduce expense, beware of “rogue” sites. Do not patronize sites that do not provide access to a registered pharmacist by e-mail or a toll-free number. Consult the National Association of Boards of Pharmacy for sites of licensed pharmacies in good standing. ([www.nabp.net](http://www.nabp.net): Click “vipps” to find a vipps [certified] on-line pharmacy.)

#### **Monitor the older adult for these signs that medications are either ineffective or causing problems:**

- Increased weakness and/or shortness of breath.
- Increased swelling of the feet and/or ankles.
- A change in behavior or increase in confusion noticed in a relatively short period of time.
- Unexplained fall(s).
- Significant weight changes.

(Do not assume that any of these changes are a normal part of aging. Check with the physician to be sure.)

#### **When administering medications to the older adult:**

- Check to see that it is the right time for the medication.
- Read the label three times, comparing it with the physician’s order as listed on the medication list.
- Pour liquid medications into a medication cup usually provided in the package. The bottom of the meniscus (the concave surface of the liquid) should line up with the calibration for the amount of the dose. Pour away from the label and cleanse the rim of the bottle after pouring.
- Do not crush time-release medications. Check with your pharmacist about whether a medication can be safely crushed.
- Pill cutters are helpful if one-half tablet of a medication is ordered.
- If the older adult has difficulty swallowing, ask him/her to place the pill on the back of his/her tongue. If he/she still has a problem, you may need to crush the medication (see above) and mix it with a small amount of food such as applesauce or ask the physician to order it in liquid form.

**To destroy old medications:** Delete personal information from the label. Add a small amount of water to solid medications and add flour or salt to liquid medications. Put them in your garbage. Do not flush pills down the sewer.