

Educate Before You Medicate

When you receive a prescription, did you know that there is a second, unwritten prescription that accompanies your medicine? This unwritten prescription comes with every medicine you take, whether it is a prescription drug, or an over-the-counter medicine that you select yourself.

This invisible prescription is for patient safety. It comes from information provided by your physician, nurse, pharmacist, or other health care professional, and by the manufacturer of your medicine.

How can you take advantage of this prescription for patient safety? Ask questions. Before you start taking a new medicine, talk to someone about what other prescriptions, over-the-counter, and dietary supplements and herbal medications that you are taking. Some medicines may interact with each other, possibly causing dangerous reactions in your body.

When you take responsibility and become an “educated healthcare consumer,” you are becoming prescription savvy.

Before you leave your doctor’s office with a new prescription in hand, ask him or her if any tests will be required while you are on this medicine to make sure it is working safely in your body. And remember, it’s your responsibility to follow through with any of those tests.

You should always ask your physician the following questions when you get a new prescription:

- What is the name of the medicine and what is it supposed to do? Is this the brand or generic name? (Is a generic version available?)
- What foods, drinks, other medicines, dietary supplements, or activities should I avoid while taking this medicine?
- How and when do I take this medicine?
- What are the possible side effects, and what do I do if they occur?
- When should I expect the medicine to begin to work, and how will I know if it is working?
- Will this new prescription work safely with the other prescription and nonprescription or herbal medicines I am taking?

And as an educated consumer, you should follow up with your pharmacist by asking the following questions:

- Do you have a patient profile form for me to fill out? Will it include space for my nonprescription drugs, herbals and any dietary supplements?
- Is there written information about my medicine? Ask the pharmacist to review the most important information with you. (Ask if it’s available in large print or, if necessary, in a language other than English.)
- What is the most important thing I should know about this medicine? Ask the pharmacist any questions that may not have been answered by your doctor.
- Can I get a refill? If so, when?
- How should I store this medicine?

In almost all states in the U.S., by law the pharmacy must ask you if you would like to be counseled about your medicine. It's important to get your questions answered, so that you can use your medication safely. Your pharmacist is part of your "medicine education team," too!

Who is the best person to talk to about prescriptions? Whomever you feel most comfortable with, someone who listens to your questions and concerns. You can talk about prescriptions with your doctor, nurse physician assistant, nurse practitioner, paramedic, and/or your pharmacist.

Using your medicines safely requires a team effort. Remember your role on the medicine team! You need to be the team leader.

All medicines have benefits as well as risks. By remembering to "Educate before you Medicate," you can get the most benefit from your medicine. It's your own prescription for patient safety.