

FROM THE EXPERTS

Get Advice From a Pharmacist

From Harvard Women's Health Watch.

WHEN YOUR PHARMACIST HANDS YOU YOUR pills, he or she is likely to ask, "Any questions?" This is an invitation to tap into a vast store of knowledge—and one you should accept. A few minutes with your pharmacist may spare you some serious health consequences.

"People are often in the dark regarding the purpose of their medication," says Dr. Gordon Schiff, associate professor of medicine at Harvard Medical School. Although prescriptions come with a lengthy package insert containing detailed information about the drug, the information is often written in technical terms and printed in microscopic type. The lack of clear information and the confusion and misunderstandings that result figure into more than a million preventable medical complications annually.

Your pharmacist can help fill the void. You may want to ask the following questions when you pick up your medication. In fact, if you are taking several prescription and over-the-counter drugs, you may want to schedule an appointment with your pharmacist to discuss all of them. Medicare and, increasingly, other insurers cover an appointment with a pharmacist, just as they do with a primary-care provider.

What is this drug for? With people taking thousands of drugs for hundreds of conditions, it isn't surprising that sound-alike mistakes are common. For example, mistaking Adderall (a stimulant prescribed for attention deficit disorder) for Inderal (a drug to treat hypertension) can drive blood pressure up instead of down. Check with your pharmacist to see whether the drug you're given is correct for the condition you have. If it isn't, have the pharmacist clarify with your physician.

How do I take it? It's important to know the best time of day to take a pill and whether you should take it with food or on an empty stom-



ach. Your pharmacist can help you devise a schedule for taking all your medications. The more you take, the more likely it is that one may affect how another works in your body. Bring a list of all your prescription drugs, over-the-counter medications, and supplements to the pharmacy. (If it's easier, gather all your pill bottles in a bag and bring them.) The pharmacist may be able to suggest ways to minimize the chance of interactions.

What side effects should I expect? The package insert that comes with your prescription probably includes a mind-numbing list of side effects. However, most serious side effects are rare, and some are much more common than others. Your pharmacist can give you a more realistic idea of which, if any, side effects you may experience.

HELP ORGANIZING YOUR PILLS

Taking prescribed medications properly is one of the most important things you can do to maintain and manage your health, but it can

be difficult to get it right as the number of pills you take increases.

One option is to have a pharmacy package your medications for you. Many pharmacies provide this service—either free or for a small fee. Pharmacies use various systems to organize pills, including bubble packs and strip packaging. In each system, the pharmacy groups your morning, afternoon, dinner, and bedtime pills, so that all you have to do is open the packaging at the appropriate time of day and take all the pills. The medicine will come labeled so you'll know which pills you are taking, but you won't have to handle or organize them.

There are also scores of reasonably priced "calendar" containers—many equipped with alarms—that accommodate a week's or month's supply of pills. If you fill your own container, it might be a good idea to take it to the pharmacist to double-check.

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