



6 WAYS TO HELP Your Older Parents Use Medications the Right Way and Prevent Problems.

These days, it's a common scenario for adults to be taking care of their aging parents in addition to raising their own children. Members of this so called "sandwich generation" often describe a tug of war with competing caregiving demands—all the while holding down careers and households of their own.

When it comes to caring for elder parents, making sure they are following their medication schedule or even taking the reins to administer their medications will—at some point—become part of the drill. This is especially true for people whose parents:

- Are older (75+ years old)
- Have multiple medical problems
- Experience declines in vision, grip strength or memory
- Are no longer able to drive themselves to and from the pharmacy or doctor appointments

In these cases, playing an active role in managing your parents' medications becomes even more necessary for their safety and health. Doing so will also help give you peace of mind.

Age-related changes also affect the way certain medications are absorbed by and work in the body. Help your older relatives get the most from their medications; make sure they are taking them the right way.

Here are 6 six ideas to get you started

1. Know what your parent is taking. Keep a medicine record or list with the following information:

- The name of each medication, including over-the-counter (OTC) medications (for example, aspirin or sleep aids) and dietary supplements (for example, St. John's Wort, garlic, Vitamin D, multivitamins)
- Why it is being taken
- Who prescribed it
- The amount (dose) taken
- How often (for example, every eight hours, once a day)
- Any special instructions (with or without food, by mouth)
- Any problems or side effects that you might have noticed or heard your parent complain about

**Certain medical conditions
can increase the risk for
medication-related problems.
Some include:**

- Cognitive impairment
- Depression
- Parkinson's Disease
- Malnutrition
- Obesity

- 2. Be an active member of your parent's healthcare team.** Go to his/her appointments and make sure you have permission to call the doctor or nurse with questions and concerns (the doctor or nurse can't talk to you without your family member's consent due to HIPPA privacy regulations).

At the next appointment, take the opportunity to review a current list of all of the medications your parent is taking. Find out if:

- All of the medications are still necessary
- Any should be discontinued because they might be unsafe or interact with other medications being used at the same time
- The dosages are appropriate given your parent's age and weight (depending on the medication, older adults might need a lower or higher dose than younger adults to get the same effect)
- There is a simpler dosing schedule (many older adults have trouble juggling and remembering to take multiple medications at different times of the day)
- There are ways to reduce costs (if cost is an issue)

NCPIE's [Make Notes and Take Notes](#) handout can help.

- 3. Read the directions.** It's tempting to skip the fine print, but take the time to read the insert (written information) that comes with your parent's prescription medications, as well as the [Drug Facts](#) label on the side of over-the-counter packaging. Ask your pharmacist if anything is unclear.

When picking up a prescription, double check the information on the prescription container to verify that your parent got the right medication. Look for the name of the medication, your parent's name and compare what the pill or capsule looks like against the description on the insert. Mistakes happen. Spending a few extra minutes to check can help you catch a serious mistake before something bad happens.

- 4. Help administer medications or ask how to help your parent keep track of or remember to take medications.** Come up with a system so that you know if your parent is taking his or her medications as directed. Consider creating a daily checklist that can be used to mark when each dose is taken. If you are far away and your parent has access to and can use a computer, send email reminders. You can also set timers with alarms and opt for other memory aids. If your parent has trouble remembering to take his or her medicine, [MUST Remember—10 Tips to Help Remind You to Stay on Schedule](#), has additional suggestions.

- 5. Check for interactions.** Drug interactions are a big concern among those 65 and up because this group often takes multiple medications in one day.

The US Food and Drug Administration created these tips for avoiding drug interactions: [Common Drug Interactions](#)

The AARP website has an online tool where you can type in your medications and check for potential interactions: [Drug Interaction Checker](#).

- 6. Cross reference your parent’s medication list with the [Beer’s Criteria](#).** The Beer’s Criteria is a listing of medications that people aged 65 and older should avoid. These medications may be ineffective or cause severe side effects in older persons. Check which medications are on the list.

Nearly one in three hospital admissions among elderly patients may be linked to problems or harmful adverse side effects due to medications they take. This includes preventable health problems such as:

- Depression
- Constipation
- Falls
- Immobility
- Confusion
- Hip Fractures

Source: Fick et al. *Arch Intern Med*, Dec 8, 2003

For more information on helping your parent use medications safely, see NCPIE’s *MUST for Seniors 10 Steps for Success* and www.mustforseniors.org.