

Which pill do I take?

Multiple pharmacies, multiple prescriptions and lots of risk

By Deb Jenkins, RN, BScN, MN



There have been increasing concerns, especially in the elderly population, about multiple prescriptions, multiple doctors and multiple pharmacies. This variation can make it hard for the individual to remember when to take which pill. In addition, the healthcare providers involved may struggle to keep track of all the prescriptions being given to a particular client.

To completely understand the issues and concerns with using multiple pharmacies, let's look at a case study as an example.

Mrs. J. is an 85-year-old woman with a number of health issues. These include heart disease, diverticulitis (a bowel condition) and psoriasis. Because of this, she visits several specialists on a regular basis. Two of her physicians are in Ottawa and she lives in Cornwall, about an hour away. When Mrs. J. visits her dermatologist and cardiologist, she gets prescriptions that she conveniently fills at the pharmacy at the Ottawa Hospital. She feels comfortable at the hospital pharmacy and it is much easier for her daughter, who often drives her and is in a hurry to return to work.

Mrs. J.'s family physician is in Cornwall, and her regular care and yearly physicals are taken care of by a family medicine clinic. The prescriptions for her bowel condition and other medications, such as cholesterol-reducing tablets, come from her local pharmacy.

Herein lies the problem—more than one pharmacy is filling Mrs. J.'s prescriptions. The local pharmacist, who knows Mrs. J. well, gets

just half of the information—but can only be of assistance when she has all the information. This means that Mrs. J. does not benefit from a “holistic approach.”

When Mrs. J. experiences any difficulties or asks questions of the pharmacist when she is feeling unwell or experiencing a particular side effect of a medication, the answers she receives are based only on the medications that a particular pharmacy has dispensed. Unfortunately, by sharing only part of her information with that pharmacist, Mrs. J. is putting herself at risk.

Solutions to these concerns

In the case study given, we have looked at using multiple pharmacies. But add in the multiple medications that Mrs. J. is taking and there is room for even more confusion. There are several ways to ease the situation. These can be quite successful in helping all of us avoid the serious side effects and the confusion that may arise when taking several drugs.

Pill minder

Purchase a “pill minder” from the local drug-store. This will contain individual storage boxes marked with the days of the week and up to four times in a day. Pills are stored in the appropriate boxes and taken each day at the right time. A pill minder can be filled weekly or monthly to ensure no pills get missed. It can also be reviewed by the pharmacist at any time.

“My doctor gave me six months to live, but when I couldn't pay the bill he gave me six months more.”

Walter Matthau

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“The patient is not likely to recover who makes the doctor his heir.”

Thomas Fuller

Talk to your pharmacist

Local pharmacies often offer a service where you can take in all your medications during a slower time of the day and a pharmacist will explain them to you. It is best to call ahead to ensure the pharmacist will have enough time to spend with you. Not all pharmacies offer this service, so be sure to check in advance.

A similar service, called MED CHECK, is offered across Ontario for anyone taking more than three prescribed medications. It is another effective way to help keep individuals (of any age) safe when taking their medications. Again, you can take your prescription medications to the local pharmacy and have them explained to you. It is not a service for vitamins or over-the-counter medications.

One final thing. When you fill a prescription, your pharmacist will print a sheet that lets you know all the side effects and best times of day to take your medication. He or she will also give you a wallet-sized list of all your prescription medications. These little sheets are usually

attached to your official prescription receipt. They should be presented at another pharmacy or at a specialist appointment to ensure that everyone involved in your healthcare knows all the prescription medications you are taking.

Keep a list

Keep an up-to-date list of all prescription and non-prescription medications and supplements with you at all times. Add new prescriptions and other items immediately. All of your doctors should be shown this at each appointment. Advise your family physician if a specialist prescribes a medication.

Use one pharmacy

Try to fill all of your prescriptions at one pharmacy. If you have existing repeat prescriptions elsewhere, ask your local pharmacy to arrange a transfer. This is usually a complimentary service and will assist with one-stop shopping.

Get free delivery

If picking up medications is difficult, ask if your pharmacy offers a free delivery service. This will reduce delays and eliminate in-store waiting times for you and family members. It might also be a good idea to order other personal care items, such as adult briefs, dental care products, vitamins and nutritional supplements, at the same time.

In conclusion...

In closing, taking several prescription medications at one time and having many physician appointments can be confusing and even a bit scary, especially if you are elderly. It is important to trust your healthcare provider—your physician, specialist or pharmacist—but remember, they are only able to provide you with sound advice if you give them all the details of the prescription and non-prescription medications you are taking. Don't forget to include any other pertinent information about your health so they can guide you to a safer lifestyle when taking prescription medications. If you have questions or concerns, talk to your physician or pharmacist. They will be happy to help you! ●



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Using medications safely

No matter where you got your medications from, it's important to remember the following points to ensure you use prescriptions safely:

1. Know what your prescription is. Write down the brand name and the scientific name, as well as the dosage, frequency and possible side effects.
2. Tell your doctor and pharmacist if you've ever had a reaction to any medication. With a new medication, watch out for itchiness, rash, swelling, difficulty breathing, nausea, feeling faint and depression.
3. Follow the directions on the bottle exactly. It's important to take your medication at the same time each day.
4. If you forget to take a dosage, do not double up on the next one. Call your doctor or pharmacist for advice.
5. Finish the entire prescription, even if you feel better.
6. Don't share your medication with anyone or take anyone else's, even if it's labelled the same.
7. Find out if you should be abstaining from alcohol.
8. When storing medication bottles, keep them up high away from children, pets and sunlight, and only in the fridge if specified. Dispose of them by taking them to the pharmacy once they have expired.

Source: www.canadapharma.org