



About the National Council on Patient Information and Education

NCPIE is a nonprofit coalition representing healthcare professionals, consumers and patients, the pharmaceutical industry, voluntary health agencies, and federal and state governments. NCPIE is committed to stimulating and improving communication of information on appropriate use of medicines to consumers and healthcare professionals.

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About Consumer Health Information Corporation

This pamphlet was written and produced by Consumer Health Information Corporation, a member of the Board of Directors of NCPIE. The company specializes in patient education and develops programs to help consumers learn how to manage their health and medicines safely.

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Get the Most from Your Medicines

Managing Side Effects



This leaflet contains practical tips that will help you get the most benefit from your medicines.

Learning How to Manage Side Effects

Today's prescription medicines can save lives, help prevent disease, and keep people out of the hospital. But they can also cause unwanted side effects.

Some side effects are common. Others are very rare. Side effects can occur even though the medicine is being taken correctly at the normal dose.

Have you ever stopped taking a medicine because it caused a side effect? Unfortunately, many people who develop a minor side effect stop taking their medicine without first checking with their healthcare professional (doctor, pharmacist, physician assistant, nurse, or dentist). The result is that the medicine never gets the chance to work, and your medical condition could get worse.

Often, there are simple steps that can be taken to manage minor side effects. That is why, when starting a medicine, it is important to know:

- what the possible side effects might be.
- what you can do to manage minor side effects.
- which symptoms should prompt you to get medical advice.

The decisions you make about how to manage side effects can play a big role in how successful your treatment will be.



Most Side Effects Are Mild...

Most side effects are mild enough that you can manage them successfully and still keep taking your medicine. Depending on the medicine, your healthcare professional may be able to suggest simple steps you can take to manage mild side effects such as upset stomach, diarrhea, or constipation.

Sometimes your doctor may need to change the dose of your medicine or recommend other treatments to help manage the side effect. Other times, your doctor may prescribe a different medicine that is less likely to cause the side effect.

...But Some Can Be Serious

Some side effects can be serious. These are often called "adverse drug reactions." They may require admission to a hospital or even be life-threatening.

Ask your doctor or pharmacist about any serious side effects that have been reported for your medicine. For example, a sore throat, fever, and mouth sores could be the early warning signs of a life-threatening blood problem with some medicines. However, you might just think you were coming down with the flu. Another example is easy bruising or nosebleeds if you are taking a medicine that is used to thin the blood. These may be signs that the dose of your blood thinning medicine needs to be changed.

If you recognize the warning symptoms early, you can get treatment before they become more serious. When you know how to recognize the early warning signs of a serious side effect, your doctor can take immediate steps to help keep the problem from getting worse.

Will I Get a Side Effect?

It is hard to predict if a side effect might occur. You might have no side effects at all or you may develop side effects from a medicine that caused no problems when you took it in the past.

It depends on the medicine you are taking and how your body handles it. Different medicines cause different side effects. And since everyone's body is different, not everyone will react the same way. Your age, weight, sex, specific medical problems, and other medicines you are taking can also affect your chances of getting a side effect.

Sometimes your symptoms might not be a side effect from a medicine at all, but may be due to another medical problem that requires your doctor's attention. If you are ever in doubt - get professional advice. Do not take risks with your health.

Your Role in Reporting Side Effects

After a medicine has been approved by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA), it can be prescribed for patients. FDA keeps track of any new side effects that might appear through its "MedWatch" program. If you have a serious side effect, please ask your healthcare professionals to report it to MedWatch.

Consumers can also report side effects directly to FDA. A volunteer MedWatch form is available online at: <http://www.fda.gov/medwatch/report/consumer/consumer.htm> or by calling 1-888-463-6332 [1-888-INFO-FDA]. If you would prefer to report a side effect directly by telephone, call the FDA Office of Emergency Operations at (301) 443-1240.



Tips to Manage Mild Side Effects

If your medicine causes mild or annoying side effects, there may be some simple steps you can take to help manage them. Since every medicine is different, it is always important to check with your healthcare

professional first before you try to manage a side effect yourself. It is important to know which side effects are safe to treat yourself. You should also know which side effects are not safe to treat yourself and when to call the doctor.

Mild Stomach Upset

- Take your medicine with food or milk. However, be sure to check with your doctor or pharmacist first because not all medicines can be taken this way.
- Sip small amounts of water or ginger ale.
- Stick to bland foods such as soups, applesauce, etc.
- Avoid spicy foods and heavy meals.

Mild Diarrhea

- Try eating bananas, rice, applesauce, or toast.
- Sip clear fluids.
- Avoid milk or dairy products, caffeine, citrus juices, foods high in fiber, and spicy foods.
- If you are taking an antibiotic, ask your healthcare professional if yogurt would help.
- Call your doctor if the diarrhea becomes worse or lasts more than three days.

Mild Constipation

- Drink plenty of fluids.
- Eat foods high in fiber such as fruits (apples, peaches, oranges), vegetables (carrots, corn, peas), and grains (whole wheat and bran cereals).
- Exercise.
- Call your doctor if the constipation does not get better within a few days.

Dizziness

- Avoid driving a car or operating dangerous equipment. With some medicines, the dizziness will go away as your body gets used to the medicine.
- Do not stand up too quickly. Get out of bed slowly and sit on the side of the bed for a few minutes before standing up.
- Some medicines make people more sensitive to heat. In these cases, avoid hot baths, saunas and jacuzzis, or getting overheated during exercise.

Dry Mouth

- Suck on hard sour candy, ice chips, or lemon.
- Try drinking tart lemonade because it helps the mouth make more saliva.

Sensitivity to Sunlight

- If your medicine makes you more sensitive to the sun, use sunblock and wear sunglasses and clothes that protect your skin. Stay indoors or in shaded areas as much as possible.

Some of these tips may not be right for you.

These tips do not cover all the possible side effects from medicines, and are not meant to take the place of your healthcare professional's advice. If you develop any

unusual symptoms that your healthcare professional has not told you about, it is important that you get medical advice before trying to manage them on your own.

Steps You Can Take

You play an important role in your treatment. Your healthcare professionals depend on you to ask questions and give them feedback so they can give you the best care possible. Since you will usually be the first person to notice any unusual symptoms or that you are "just not feeling right," it is important to know what you should do about a possible side effect from the very start.

- ✓ Ask the following questions before you take your medicine home.
 - What are the common side effects this medicine might cause?
 - How can I manage mild side effects so I can keep taking the medicine?
 - Are there any serious side effects this medicine might cause? If so, what are the early warning signs so I can get immediate medical help?
 - When should I call the doctor?
- ✓ Read about side effects in the information that you get at the pharmacy. Reread it every time you get the medicine refilled. The information may have changed or you might have new questions.
- ✓ Keep a record of any side effects you might have had between doctor or pharmacy visits. Write down the date and the steps your health care provider told you to take. Discuss it with your doctor during your next visit.
- ✓ Seek medical advice if you don't know if you are starting to develop a side effect.

Be prepared! Once you know how to recognize and manage minor side effects, you can play an active role in your own treatment. You will also have the peace of mind that you are doing everything possible to benefit from your medicines.