

BE ALERT FOR MEDICATION ERRORS

Rarely a year passes without the announcement of some new wonder drug to treat another disease. While more and better drugs are usually considered a good thing, the increase in the number of drugs available and in the number of drugs the average person takes has led to an explosion in the number of errors made in prescriptions.

These errors can take all kinds of forms and can occur in many different ways. Sometimes a drug other than the one prescribed is provided, or the correct drug is provided in the wrong dosage. Sometimes a drug is prescribed that interacts negatively with another drug the person is taking and the patient is not warned of the danger. Sometimes the mistake is made by the doctor prescribing the drug, sometimes by the pharmacist filling the prescription, sometimes by the person administering the prescribed drug. Mistakes can occur in hospitals, nursing homes, and the corner drugstore. Regardless of the many different ways that prescription problems can occur, they all share one thing: They can be serious and potentially deadly.

A recent study concluded that out of 3 billion prescriptions filled each year, *51.5 million of them contain some kind of error*. Although reliable statistics are hard to come by, these errors lead to thousands of unnecessary hospitalizations and hundreds of unnecessary deaths.

Cases involving prescription errors can involve claims of negligence, medical malpractice, and products liability. These cases generally require a great deal of expert testimony and can be very complicated to pursue, either as an individual claim, or as a class-action lawsuit.

Interestingly, many consider the primary reason for the rise in errors to be financial—the doctors who write the prescriptions, the pharmacists who fill them, and the nurses who often administer them are pressured to serve more patients in less time, increasing profits, but also increasing the risk of an error. Others point to the rise in the marketing of drugs directly to patients. Patients are more likely to go to their doctors and demand a prescription for some drug they saw on television, leading to more prescriptions and more chances for error.

Several solutions to this problem have been suggested. The first is also the easiest: Slow down and make sure the prescription is correct. The second is to install more safeguards, such as having another person check the prescription. Another solution is to make sure that different drugs or different dosages don't look similar, reducing the chance that the wrong pills or the wrong bottle of pills will be used. Yet another suggested solution is to make sure that pills are always available in many dosages, which will prevent people from having to break their pills into halves or quarters, possibly exceeding the intended dosage.

According to the U.S. Food and Drug Administration, patients can also use the following strategies to avoid medication errors:

- Find out what drug you're taking, and what it's for. Ask the doctor both the brand name and the pharmaceutical name of the drug, and ask the doctor to write the purpose of the drug on your prescription. In the hospital, ask (or have a friend or family member ask) what drugs you are being given and why.
- Find out how to take the drug and make sure you understand the directions. For example, if you are told to take a medicine three times a day, does that mean eight hours apart exactly, or at mealtimes? Are there certain foods or beverages you should avoid? What are possible side effects, and what should you do about them?
- Keep a list of all medications, including over the counter drugs, dietary supplements, herbs, etc. and report them to your physician. If possible, get all your prescriptions filled at the same pharmacy so all your records are in one place. Report all drug allergies and unpleasant drug reactions.
- Do not use expired over the counter or prescription medications. Throw them out.
- If in doubt, ask, ask, ask. Be on the lookout for clues of a problem, such as your pills looking different than normal, a different drug name, or different directions.

Any way you look at it, when it comes to avoiding medication errors, *prevention* seems to be the best medicine.

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