

Using medicines wisely

Who wants to take pills and potions every day? No one! But many of us have to take medicines to stay well and, for some people, even to stay alive.



We share how to get the best medicines information from your health professionals to stay safe and well. Knowing exactly what to ask them is an important first step.

Get to know your medicines

Knowing about your medicines can help you get the most benefit from them and avoid problems with them.

Ask your doctor or pharmacist the following questions:

- Why am I taking this medicine?
- Why might it have changed?
- When and how do I take it?
- Are there any special instructions?
- How long I need to take the medicine for?
- How do I tell if it's working?
- Will I need any tests during treatment and, if so, why?
- What happens if I forget to take a dose?
- What should I do if I take too much?

Serious health problems or accidents can occur when some medications, eg, [warfarin](#), [methotrexate](#), [insulin](#) and [morphine](#), are not used as directed. Learn how to take them with extra care.

Be prepared for side effects

All medicines, including over-the-counter medicines, herbal remedies, vitamins and supplements, can have side effects.

Not all people experience side effects, some are more common than others and not all side effects can be prevented. But recognising them, and knowing what to do if you have them, can prevent harm.

Side effects are more likely to occur within hours or days of starting a new medicine, as your body gets used to it. But some side effects may be delayed, starting after taking the medicine for some time.

When you start a new medicine, ask about what side effects to look out for, anything you can do to ease them and any serious effects that require immediate medical attention.

On rare occasions drug reactions can be serious or life threatening. Ask what serious side effects to look out for and when to seek immediate help.

Get your medicines reviewed annually

Sometimes medicines you are taking may no longer be needed. It's a good idea to have all your medicines checked once a year by your pharmacist or doctor. Discuss what you gained from taking your medicine or what it is about your medicine that troubles you most – that way you can find out if a different medicine or another treatment can help.

Keep an updated list of your medicines and supplements

Problems with medicines, like interactions, can happen at any time, but there are some situations when they are more likely to happen, eg, during a stay in hospital, when starting a new medicine or herbal remedy, or having your dose changed by a different doctor.

One of the best ways to prevent problems with medicines is to keep an updated list, called a 'yellow card', of all the medicines, supplements, drops and vitamins you are taking. Remember to include any drug allergies. Show your card to everyone involved in your healthcare to avoid harmful interactions.

Make wise lifestyle choices

Be proactive and talk to your doctor about your medicine options. For example, some people can avoid medication and lower their blood pressure enough with increased exercise and healthy eating. Losing weight or being physically active can also prevent or delay the onset of diabetes and reduce pain in osteoarthritis.

Some questions to ask your doctor are the following:

- Is what I am taking the best for me?
- Are there any other medicines or treatment choices I could try?
- Should I consider counselling or lifestyle changes, such as changes to my physical activity, sleep, weight or diet?

Talk to your healthcare team

Of course, don't just stop your medicines without discussing this with your doctor or pharmacist first. And keep talking to your healthcare team about what you can do to refine your medications and optimise your health and wellbeing.

Need more help?

To learn more about medicines, visit www.healthnavigator.org.nz and search for "medicines".