

## About medications

As a caregiver you need to understand the use of medications, and be alert to possible overmedication and to adverse reactions to drug combinations. No medications prevent or cure Alzheimer's disease, but there are drugs approved by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration to treat Alzheimer symptoms. Physicians may also prescribe drugs to manage delusions and hallucinations, depression, agitation or sleeplessness.

Although these medications may affect specific disease symptoms and assist in managing them, they can also produce side effects such as agitation, dry mouth, drowsiness, problems in walking, tremors, falling or constipation.

Even though a physician might prescribe a drug for a limited period of time, it can sometimes take up to four weeks for a drug to leave the person's system after use is discontinued.

Some medications can contribute to the person's problems and make some symptoms even worse. For example, a person who begins taking drugs for high blood pressure or a heart problem might appear to be more confused than before he or she began taking the drugs.

So called anti-cholinergic drugs can also block the production of a chemical within the brain called acetylcholine and further alter the person's memory.

To understand the effects of medications and how to manage their use, consider the following tips.

### Get medical advice

Be cautious about giving any medication—whether it's an over-the-counter or prescription drugs.

- Begin by asking your physician to review all medication to check for possible drug interactions.
- Make sure that every physician involved with the person's care knows about all prescribed medications.
- Find out as much as possible about every medication, including name, purpose, dosage, frequency and possible

side effects. If serious side effects occur, report them to the physician.

### Be prudent

Under no circumstances should you change dosages without first consulting the physician. In addition, avoid the temptation to overreport symptoms in order to persuade your physician to prescribe a new drug or to increase the person's dosage. Do not share medications with other caregivers or keep medication bottles from old prescriptions.

### Rely on your pharmacist for information

Pharmacists can be another information source. Your local pharmacist can also check for interaction between drugs. Keep in mind that pharmacists can neither prescribe drugs nor alter drug dosages.

### Maintain accurate and ongoing records

Keep a written record of all current medications, including the name of the medication, dosage and starting date, and carry a copy of this list with you in your wallet or purse at all times. This record will be invaluable in the event of a serious drug interaction or overdose.

### Be candid and direct

In clear, simple language help the individual understand the kinds of medications he or she is taking and why. In addition, offer clear instructions such as these: "Here's the pill for your high blood pressure. Put it in your mouth and drink some water."

### Develop a routine for giving the medication

Giving medications in a specific way at specific times of the day or evening will help reduce conflicts. However, if the person refuses to take the medication, stop and try again at a later time.

- Never assume the individual will take medications on his or her own. It may be necessary to check and see whether the medicine has been swallowed. At some point, you may need to assume responsibility for giving the person medications.

---

## **Stay organized**

Separating pills into a plastic container with small compartments labeled “day” and “evening” or “Monday,” “Tuesday,” “Wednesday,” etc. will help track medications.

- Other caregivers find it useful to give medications in individual cups or envelopes or to keep a calendar and check off each dose as it’s taken.

## **Adapt to the person**

If the person has problems swallowing pills or spits out the pills, ask your physician if the medication is available in some other form, such as a liquid.

Some medications can be crushed and mixed with food. However, no pill or tablet should be crushed without first consulting your physician or pharmacist. Crushing some medications may cause them to be ineffective or unsafe.

## **Take safety precautions**

Put a lock on the medicine cabinet or place the medications in a locked drawer. If the person spits out pills, make sure these pills aren’t picked up and eaten by children or pets.

- Avoid leaving the person alone with medication bottles in the room. Be sure to throw out all old medicines.

## **Be prepared for emergencies**

Research the names and telephone numbers of pharmacies or other services that deliver medications. Also find out the names of pharmacies that are open on Sundays and weekends.

- Keep the number of your local poison control center or emergency room handy.
- If you suspect a medication overdose, call before taking any action.

The Alzheimer’s Association is fighting on your behalf to give everyone a reason to hope. For more information about Alzheimer research, treatment and care, please contact the Alzheimer’s Association.

Contact Center **1.800.272.3900**

TDD Access **312.335.8882**

Web site **www.alz.org**

e-mail **info@alz.org**

Fact sheet updated **June 2, 2004**