

# Prescription Drugs: What Every Caregiver Should Know

As a caregiver, helping someone take their prescriptions safely is a crucial part of your role. Find out ways to help keep the person you're caring for safe when they're taking prescription drugs.

If you're providing care to an older friend or family member, chances are good that managing their prescriptions is part of your role. Here are some important safety measures that should be on your radar.

## Know the Risk

Nearly nine in ten adults age 65 and older are currently taking prescription medicine — often with multiple prescriptions, according to KFF, a non-profit organization that analyzes national health issues. While most of that medication is administered and taken safely with life-improving and even life-saving results, some of it is not — and the outcomes can be dangerous. Nearly 1.3 million people went to emergency rooms due to adverse drug effects in 2014, according to the most recent data available from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

## Manage Medication Wisely

As a caregiver, you can help prevent three common problems with prescription drugs. These include: taking too many, taking drugs that aren't needed and taking drugs prematurely. Here are some ways to curb those risks:

### 1. Ask the right questions when getting a diagnosis and prescription.

If the person in your care isn't fully able to communicate with their doctors, that task is your responsibility. Make sure you are all on the same page when it comes to what a new prescription will treat, what the side effects may be, and if it's the safest option. Make sure you give a list of all current prescriptions, over-the-counter medications, herbals and supplements to every doctor.



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### **2. Triple-check all directions.**

Whether you're administering the medication yourself or helping someone take their own pills, always make sure that everything is being taken as prescribed.

Don't let the person in your care make any changes (for example: the time of day it's taken, or taking something more or less frequently) without speaking to their doctor or pharmacist.

### **3. Watch for side effects.**

Watch the person in your care for new symptoms once they start a new medication. Even if they don't have a scheduled follow-up, you can call their doctor or nurse and discuss side effects or any problems you observe.

### **4. Only order prescriptions from a trusted pharmacy.**

If the pharmacy you use regularly has an online portal, go ahead and take advantage of the convenience. But steer clear of non-affiliated sites or "bargain" sites with origins in other countries. Counterfeit prescription drugs can be ineffective at best and extremely dangerous at worst.

### **5. Never substitute.**

Never use a pill from someone else's prescription to fill in the gap between trips to the pharmacy for the person you're caring for. Even if you and your care recipient both take a medication for high cholesterol, for example, the dosage or other properties of the medicine may not be the same.

## **Preventing Opioid Misuse**

Opioids are a type of drug used to manage pain. Oxycodone, hydrocodone-acetaminophen (Vicodin, MNorco) and morphine are the three most common. When used as prescribed by a doctor, opioids can help relieve pain in the short term (for example, after hip surgery). However, the CDC warns that opioids also come with serious health risks and complications. Anyone — including older adults — can become addicted to opioids. This can result in side effects such as increased sensitivity to pain, constipation, nausea, confusion and depression. Opioid addiction can also lead to overdose and death.

Opioid use among older adults is a complex challenge, according to a 2017 report from the Administration for Community Living. This age group tends to have an increased reliance on opioids to ease age-related physical pain. Opioids also have a stronger impact on older adults due to slowing body processes, including reduced metabolism.

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As a caregiver, you can help your friend or family member avoid opioid addiction. You may want to ask their physician about non-opioid pain management options. These might include ibuprofen or acetaminophen, antidepressants, anti-seizure medications, physical therapy, exercise and even cognitive behavioral therapy. This is especially important if someone in your care has a history of misusing drugs or alcohol.

Ultimately, of course, the decision to prescribe opioids must take place between the person you care for and their doctor. But you're not wrong to make sure pain-management discussions include the dangers of opioid abuse as well as other pain management options.

**Work together with the person you're caring for and their medical team. Together, you can ensure safe prescription use.**

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Aging and disability in America

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