Using Your MedicinesWisely:
A Guide for the Elderly
DO

• Tell your doctors about all the medicines you are taking and about any allergies or sensitivity you may have to any drug.

• Be sure you understand all instructions before starting to use a drug — including when to take it, with what, how long to continue, what to do if problems occur.

• Make sure you take medicines when you’re supposed to — which for people taking several drugs might mean having a system for keeping track.

• Call your doctor if you notice any new symptoms or side effects.

• Keep drugs in airtight containers and store them properly.

• Keep a permanent record of all drugs and vaccines you are sensitive or allergic to.

(For some DON'Ts, see back cover.)

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Introduction

Using medications properly concerns each of us personally. Misuse of prescriptions and over-the-counter drugs can lead to permanent damage and, in some cases, death. Although the medical and pharmaceutical professions also have major roles to play in improving our use of medications, I am convinced that the greatest improvement can come from a better educated public. In particular, no other group stands to gain as much from heightened awareness of drug use and potential abuse as do the elderly.

The Office for Substance Abuse Prevention revised this booklet which was developed by the National Institute on Drug Abuse. The enclosed information focuses on some of the problems elderly Americans confront as drug consumers and provides practical guidelines to deal with these problems.

The purpose of this booklet is to help ensure the appropriate use of medications by older Americans.

Elaine M. Johnson, Ph.D.
Director
Center for Substance Abuse Prevention
We live in a time when medical advances are happening faster than at any time in the past. Only ten years ago, less than half the medicines now in use were on the market. Partly because of the new drugs, more people live longer, they are healthier, and they are far more independent than in past generations. Today's older people in particular benefit from the new medicines.

But with these benefits come risks. Drugs are powerful substances — and if they're not used carefully, the consequences can be serious. Drugs can affect different people in different ways. People can sometimes forget whether or not they took a medicine. They might have trouble keeping track of what to take and when. Because elderly people generally take more medicines than anyone else, they naturally run a greater risk of having problems with drugs.

But these risks can be avoided. If you know how to prepare for a visit to your doctor, what questions to ask, how to take medicines, and what side effects to watch out for, you can cut
down the risk of having bad reactions. The information in this booklet can help you do all these things.

**Taking Responsibility for Your Own Health Care**

Medicines now control many diseases that were crippling or fatal in the past — diseases such as arthritis, diabetes, high blood pressure, and some heart ailments. But the more new medicines there are, the more important it is for the patient to take responsibility for using them properly.

In this world of medical specialists, advanced technology, and new medicines that act in ways you don't understand, you — the patient — still must make the major decisions about your own health. You are not alone, of course, for your doctors, pharmacists, and other health professionals are there to help you. But how you use their advice is up to you.
Diseases Controlled by Modern Medicine

There are many decisions for you to make about your health care and the medicines you take. This booklet is aimed at helping you make those decisions. It talks about four things you can do to ensure the best health care for yourself:

- Giving and receiving clear information when you visit the doctor
• Getting information about medicines from your pharmacist
• Organizing a system for taking your medicines
• Recognizing, and knowing what to do, when a medicine causes negative side effects.

**Giving and Receiving Clear Information When You Visit the Doctor**

Doctors and patients are partners. The doctor depends on the patient for basic information. And the doctor's advice is good only if the patient follows it. As soon as you, the patient, leave the doctor's office, you are in charge of obtaining your medicines, taking them according to instructions, and paying attention to the results. You have a need—and a right—to know how to do this properly.

As a patient, you wear two hats. First, you are a person seeking help because you are sick. Your task here is to tell the doctor what he or she needs to know and submit to examination. Second, as the person who must manage your own health care
plan, you must learn as much as you can about your state of health and about the medicines prescribed for you. If you do not get full, clear instructions, the best medical opinion may be of little help.

Unfortunately, a visit to the doctor may end with the patient not really understanding what to do. What can you do to guarantee that you get good instructions? To answer this, let's look at what often goes wrong when you visit the doctor, what can be done about it, and what information you should have when you leave.

**What Goes Wrong?**

In the doctor's office, you may be anxious and may feel ill and weak. You are examined and questioned, often by a stranger asking intimate questions. The doctor may seem too busy or impersonal; his or her tests may cause you pain or embarrassment. Several other people may be waiting to see the doctor. The office itself may be uncomfortable. Seeing a doctor may be
something new to you, and you may be uncertain about what to ask, how to ask it, and how the doctor will respond.

Many of the questions you want to ask might never quite come up. This is understandable. The relief we feel at having an expert take care of us might make us forget that in the weeks and months to come, we will be responsible for taking our own medicines. We may not realize how important it is to know about these medicines so we can avoid any risks.

Does that sound discouraging? You can do something to improve things.

**Preparing for the Doctor's Visit – What To Bring**

As the doctor's partner, you should tell the doctor all he or she needs to know in order to diagnose your problem and prescribe the proper medicines. Think about the office visit beforehand — and while you do, prepare a written list of things to tell the doctor and questions you want to ask. If you have trouble writing, ask a friend or relative to help you prepare this list.

When you go to the doctor, bring all the medicines you are
using, or — if it is easier — bring a written list of all of them. Include the drugs you take that do not require a prescription, such as aspirin or laxatives. Every doctor you see needs to know about all your medicines so he or she can avoid duplicating them or prescribing medicines that will cause a bad reaction when taken together with your other medicines. One drug might harmfully reduce or increase the effects of another; or the combination of two drugs may produce a new and dangerous reaction.

You should also bring a written list of your allergies and the medicines you have had a negative reaction to.

**Information To Get from the Doctor**

By the end of the visit, you should get instructions from the doctor for properly taking any medicines prescribed. Before leaving the office, you should know the answers to these questions for each drug prescribed for you:

- What am I taking?
• When and how often should I take it? Under what circumstances—before, with, after, or between meals? At bedtime? As needed?
• How long should I take it?
• Will there be any side effects? Should I report them?

Information To Get from Your Doctor
About Each Drug Prescribed

Here is a chart containing a list of questions and space for answering them that you can use as a guide for getting the information you need from the doctor. You can copy this chart and bring a copy to be filled in each time you visit the doctor. (You might want to bring additional copies in case more than two medicines are prescribed.) If you go over the list of questions before the visit, you will be more alert to what information you should be getting.
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<tr>
<th>QUESTION</th>
<th>DRUG A</th>
<th>DRUG B</th>
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<td>What is the name of the drug?</td>
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<td>Why am I taking it? What's it for?</td>
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<td>How often should I take it?</td>
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<td>How long must I take it?</td>
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<td>Will there be side effects? What are they?</td>
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<td>Are there any side effects I should report to the doctor immediately?</td>
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<td>Is there anything special I should know about in taking this drug?</td>
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<td>(For example, take with meals; other drugs I shouldn't take with it;</td>
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<td>driving restrictions.)</td>
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According to doctors we have spoken to, your doctor will probably be pleased that you ask questions and will gladly provide the answers. Your doctor wants you to take his or her advice seriously and to be concerned about the use of medicines. If you're worried about taking up too much of the doctor's time, you can avoid that by preparing your list of questions beforehand and providing space to write the answers.

It's important not only to hear the answers to these questions, but to write them down so you can refer to them later. If you can't write everything down while you are still with the doctor, sit down in the waiting room and finish up. That way, you can get everything down while it is still fresh in your mind. Your recollection will never be better than right then. And if you find you still have questions or don't understand things, you can ask for the information you need right on the spot.

The more familiar you are in advance with what you need to know, the easier it is to ask questions and understand the
doctor's advice. And the second time you go through the process, it will go faster, easier, and better.

**Getting Information About Medicine from Your Pharmacist**

After you receive a prescription from your doctor, you take it to the pharmacist to have it filled. The pharmacist is an expert on drugs and their effects. He or she can provide you with valuable information on:

- Side effects of prescription and over-the-counter medicines
- How to get easy-to-open caps rather than the difficult child-proof caps on your medicines
- How to save money on drugs.

When you buy over-the-counter drugs, ask your pharmacist how they might interact with other drugs you are taking. All drugs have effects on your body. Your pharmacist can help you prevent problems, *if you ask.*
Many people have trouble opening child-proof bottle caps. You may have this problem. If so, ask your pharmacist to substitute an easy-to-open cap for you. Most pharmacies carry both kinds of bottle caps and will gladly substitute for you, if you ask.

Your pharmacist can also help you decide whether to use a less expensive generic drug instead of a brand-name drug. A brand name is the name a company gives the drug for marketing purposes and is usually higher priced than the same drug manufactured by a generic manufacturer. For example, aspirin is a generic name; Bayer and Anacin are brand names. Because there may be differences in the way various drug products behave in the body, it may be unwise to substitute one product for another. Your pharmacist should know what drugs can be substituted safely, so ask him or her to advise you.
Organizing a System for Taking Your Medicines

To get the most benefit from prescribed drugs, and to reduce the risks, you must take them properly — according to directions. The following charts and systems were developed to help solve the two main problems that people have in taking medicines:

- **Keeping track of different medicines** (often a problem when many medicines are prescribed, or when they have to be taken at different times)

- **Forgetting** whether or not a drug has been taken.

A person with a chronic illness may need more than one medicine to control it. Often, people with more than one ailment may have to take four or more drugs per day. Doing so can be very complicated. If a person takes several medicines a day, at different times and with different special instructions, there is a
lot to remember in order to keep everything straight. Organizing a system for taking drugs will make this task easier and surer.

Even if you take only a few drugs, complications can arise if you have no sure way to remember whether or not you have taken a medicine. Check-off charts can be designed that are simple to use, especially if you take only one or two medicines. However, you must always remember to check off the space on the chart when you do take the drug.

There are so many variations in drug regimens and people's life styles that different people need different systems for keeping track of their medications. We have developed several easy-to-use charts and aids that you can choose from or adapt to your own needs. They will help you see at a glance:

- What to take
- When to take it
- How to take it
- Whether or not you have taken it.
**SYSTEM A: "MEDICINES I TAKE" CHART**

If you take several medicines and you have trouble keeping in mind what drugs to take, when, and under what specific directions, this chart can help. The chart provides space for:

- The name of each drug and what it's for
- What it looks like (its shape, color, etc.)
- Directions for taking it (for example, how many times a day it should be taken, whether it should be taken during or after meals, etc.), and any special cautions or side effects (will you feel drowsy, is it OK to drink alcoholic beverages, etc.)
- The actual times of day it should be taken (based on the directions).

Just copy this chart on a large sheet of paper so you can read it easily and can list all the medicines you are taking. Hang this chart near the place where you keep your medicines.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of Drug &amp; What It's For</th>
<th>Color/Shape</th>
<th>Directions &amp; Cautions</th>
<th>Times</th>
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**SYSTEM B: WEEKLY DIRECTIONS AND CHECK-OFF CHART**

This is a handy chart for keeping track of when you should take your medicines and for checking them off after you have taken them. This chart can be copied on a small card and carried with you if you are outside the house much of the time, or it can be copied on a larger sheet of paper to hang up at home.

Here are two copies of the chart. The top one is a blank chart that you can copy; the bottom is a sample chart as it might look when filled out. It shows that the user has taken all his medicines up to 5:00 on Tuesday of that week.

To use the chart, first mark off space for the name of the drug and directions, and for seven days of the week. Then list the name of each drug and its directions, using one line for each drug.

Next, under the days of the week, write in the times you should take the medicine each day. Each time you take the drug, simply cross out that time.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NAME OF DRUG/ DIRECTIONS</th>
<th>SUN</th>
<th>MON</th>
<th>TUE</th>
<th>WED</th>
<th>THU</th>
<th>FRI</th>
<th>SAT</th>
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<tr>
<td>DRUG A - 3 Times a day</td>
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<td>8</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>8</td>
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<tr>
<td>DRUG B - once a day in A.M.</td>
<td>8</td>
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<td>8</td>
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<tr>
<td>DRUG C - 3 Times a day</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>12</td>
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If this chart works for you, a time-saving way to replace it each week is to fill it out and then photocopy a few copies of it. Every week, simply pin up another copy. But if your medicines or instructions change, be sure you make the necessary changes on the charts or throw them away and make new ones.

**SYSTEM C: COLOR-CODING**  
(in combination with the A or B chart)

If you have trouble reading the labels on prescription containers, or if you would just rather not bother, you can color code both the chart you use and your medicine bottles. To do this, you will need either gummed labels in various colors or colored marking pens.

First, fill in the chart for all the medicines you are taking. Then, put a different color on the label of each bottle. (Make sure you can see the color clearly.) Next, for each drug, put a color mark by the “name of drug” on your chart that matches the color you put on the label.

Once you have done your color coding, you will not have to
read the fine print on the labels of your medicine bottles. To
know what to take and when and how to take it, just look at your
chart. You will be able to see at a glance when the red-marked
pills should be taken, when the blue-marked pills should be
taken, etc.

Two precautions are necessary in using a color-coding sys­
tem. First, when you refill a prescription, be sure to give the new
bottle its proper color code. Second, the colors you use should
be clearly different from each other. It may be hard to tell the
difference between a dark blue and a black, or a red and an
orange. Therefore, if you take more than five or six medications,
you may want to use letters of the alphabet instead of colors.

**SYSTEM D: THE DAILY OR WEEKLY CONTAINER**

If you take the same medicines in the same dosages every
day, a *daily container* system might be helpful. The daily con­
tainer works best if you only take a few pills per day and if it is
easy to tell the difference (in shapes and colors) between them.
The daily container can be a cup. Every morning, you put the
medicines you will be taking that day in a cup. At any time during the day, you can then determine how many pills you have taken up to that point by counting how many are left in the cup. That way, you will never take more each day than you should.

If you take several pills several times a day—or if two of your medicines look alike—you might want to have several containers (say a morning cup and an afternoon cup). An egg carton would serve the same purpose. The egg carton has 12 cups which you can label for 12 hours of the day, as we have done below.
Each morning, you can put the day's pills in the proper egg cups. At four in the afternoon, for example, you would take all the pills that are in the cup marked "4." If, at 4:20 in the afternoon, you cannot remember if you took your afternoon pills, just check the carton.

If some of your prescribed medicines are to be taken every other day, or in different dosages on different days, a weekly container system could be of help. Some pharmaceutical companies produce small medication holders with a different compartment for each day of the week. If you decide that this system will work for you, see your pharmacist about getting such a container.

Cautions on using any container system: If you often have children in your home, you should be wary of using any container system, since it requires leaving medicines out in the open.

Also, some drugs, such as nitroglycerin, lose their strength if exposed to the open air; others must be kept refrigerated. Before using any container system, check with your pharma-
cist or doctor about whether your medicines will deteriorate if left out in the open for a few hours.

**General Advice on Organizing Any Medicine-Taking System**

Any system that fits your individual needs can be helpful, if it helps you maintain your routine. But a system is beneficial only if you use it carefully. The time you spend creating and following through on the system will pay off, not only in time and anxiety saved, but also in helping you take medicines properly.

**Recognizing and Reporting Side Effects**

Your responsibility for your own health care doesn’t end with getting instructions and developing a good system for taking medicines. To stay as healthy as possible, you should **pay attention to how your own body responds to medicines** and **be sensitive to side effects**.

Why? When you take several drugs each day, you might experience unusual combination effects. One drug may neutral-
ize or strengthen the effect of another. Some of these interactions are well known and are actually used by doctors to your advantage. Other interactions can cause problems. Further, when a person ages, his or her body may absorb the drugs differently than when he or she was younger. Just as an elderly person usually needs less food than a younger person needs, he or she may need less medicine.

In most cases, if medicines act on your body in negative ways, your doctor can prescribe substitute drugs or drug combinations that can do as good a job without the bad side effects. However, before the doctor can make such decisions, you must gather and report the information to him or her.

In some cases, a prescribed medicine will have an unavoidable side effect for most users. For example, some muscle relaxants make the patient feel drowsy. At this stage of medical science, there may be no alternative drug available. You need to be aware of such side effects and take them into account in your plans each day.

Do not believe that adverse effects of medications are neces-
sarily "natural," especially for older people. This may be so in a given case, but the judgment should be made by your doctor.

To reduce the risk of adverse effects from medicines, we recommend the following:

• **At every visit to the doctor, inform him or her of all the other medicines – including non-prescription drugs – you are taking.** This information will help the doctor avoid prescribing a medicine that will interact negatively with others you are taking. Further, if you already are having bad reactions to medicines, this information will help your doctor diagnose the reasons for these reactions.

• **When the medicine is prescribed, ask the doctor what you should expect to feel** and what you can do if a common side effect does occur. If the effect occurs, you will then know whether it is only to be expected or if you should again contact the doctor.

• **Take medicines as directed.** Some bad reactions may be caused by taking a drug incorrectly. Perhaps you
are taking it too often or in too large a dose, or not often enough or in too small a dose. If you must return to the doctor for advice on how to reduce bad side effects, tell him or her how you've been taking the drugs.

- **Be aware, beforehand, of what to do if anything goes wrong in taking medicines.** Know whom to contact and how to reach him or her. Keep the phone numbers of your doctors on hand — next to the telephone and on a card you carry in your wallet or purse.

**Postscript**

It is not practical or necessary to do *everything* recommended here. You should select from among the suggestions those that can be useful in your individual circumstances. The suggestions are just helpful tools for the responsible user of medicines. You have the last word on how responsible you will be for your own health care.
DON'T

• Take more — or less — than the prescribed amount of any drug.

• Stop taking a drug suddenly without checking with your doctor — even if you feel better.

• Mix alcohol and medication unless your doctor says it's ok. Although not all drugs react adversely with alcohol, many do.

• Take drugs prescribed for someone else, or give yours to someone else.

• Transfer a drug from its original bottle to another.

• Keep old or expired medicines in your medicine cabinet.
Passport to Good Health Care
NAME OF DRUG ________________________________

DATE PRESCRIBED ________________________________

DOCTOR’S NAME ________________________________

PRESCRIBED FOR WHAT? ________________________________

COLOR/SHAPE/STRENGTH ________________________________

DIRECTIONS/CAUTIONS ________________________________

NAME OF DRUG ________________________________

DATE PRESCRIBED ________________________________

DOCTOR’S NAME ________________________________

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