Putting the Cap on Medication Mix-ups

Keeping track of your medications may not be a priority on your “to-do” list, but failure to properly monitor and take your medications can have serious health consequences. Adverse drug reactions due to medication mistakes are a frequent cause of emergency room visits and hospital stays.

Do you know what medications you take? Do you have a list? Does your list match the labels on your prescription bottles at home? These are questions I ask patients every day in my practice.

It is often difficult for both physicians and patients to keep track of medications. They may be prescribed at different times by different physicians. Insurance companies may suggest alternatives. Sometimes, new medications are prescribed between office visits. Hospitalization often results in medication changes, adding to the potential for confusion.

There is no “best way” to keep track of medications. However, a few common-sense recommendations will go a long way toward ensuring safe medication use. Try these easy-to-swallow suggestions:

- Keep a written list that includes the medication name, dosage and frequency of administration.
- Make sure the list matches the labeling on your pill bottles and containers.
- Take both your list of medications and the pill containers to each doctor visit and ask the nurse or doctor to check your list for accuracy. Your list should match the list kept by your primary physician.
- If you regularly use a particular pharmacy, drugstore chain or mail-in prescription service, ask for an updated list of prescribed medications for review. Using the same pharmacy or supplier can also help identify potentially harmful drug interactions.
- Include any over-the-counter medications, supplements or vitamins that you are taking, even if they are not be prescribed by your primary physician. Important side effects and drug interactions can occur with these substances.

Your physician should review your medication list on a regular basis to try to reduce the dosage or eliminate medications that may no longer be necessary. Healthy lifestyle modification sustained over time can result in diminished requirements for some drugs. The fewer medications you have to take, the less likelihood of a mistake.

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