

Medicines – when can problems occur?

Medicines are important for managing many health conditions, but sometimes problems happen. We discuss the different types of problems that can occur and provide tips to help you use medications safely.



What sorts of problems can happen with medicines?

Problems with medicines fall into three areas: side effects, interactions and mistakes.

- **Side effects** can range from mild symptoms, such as drowsiness or feeling sick (nausea), to life-threatening conditions, although these are rare. Some side effects may go away after a while, once your body gets used to the medicine, but some side effects can last much longer and be troublesome.
- **Interaction** is the term used to describe the effect different medicines have when you take more than one of them. Adding another medicine may change the effect the first medicine has on your body. Some medicines also interact with herbal or complimentary and alternative medicines.
- **Mistakes** – on rare occasions, health professionals can make mistakes when they prescribe or give a medicine. They may forget about the interactions or get the dose wrong. You can also make mistakes with your medicines if you get confused about when and how much to take of each medicine.

For these reasons, it's good to know when problems might occur with your medicines and what you can do about that. Here are our guide to problems to watch out for and tips to help you avoid them.

1. Starting a new medicine

Side effects are more likely when starting new medicines. This can be because your body isn't used to the effects of the medicine yet. With time, most side effects ease. If you are already taking medicines, starting a new medicine may cause an interaction between the medicines.

TIP: When you are prescribed a new medicine ask your doctor or pharmacist about the most likely side effects and interactions, and whether there is anything you can do to ease them.

2. Changes in the dose of your medicines

Side effects and medicine interactions may depend on the dose of the medicines you are taking. Generally, the higher the dose of a medicine you take, the more likely you are to experience these problems.

- You may begin to experience side effects and interactions when your medicine dose increases.
- With some medicines, decreasing the dose could also affect another medicine you take.
- Dose adjustments can mean changes to when and how much of your medicines you take, which may make it harder for you to manage them or easier for you to get confused and mix them up.
- Having to take a medicine for a long time can cause problems too.

TIP: When you have had a change in the dose of your medicine, ask your doctor or pharmacist about any side effects you should be aware of.

3. Buying non-prescription medicines

Non-prescription medicines, including over-the-counter medicines from a pharmacy or supermarket and complementary medicines such as herbal remedies, vitamins and minerals, can have some risks and side effects and may interact with some medicines.

TIP: When buying a non-prescription medicine, tell your pharmacist about any medical conditions or illnesses you have. They can check whether the medicine is safe to take or whether there is a safer one. If you are already taking medicines, ask your doctor or pharmacist to check whether there are any interactions with your new medicine.

4. Going to and leaving hospital

Changes to medicines are quite common during a stay in hospital. New medicines may be started or medicines you have been taking at home may be changed or stopped. This can increase the chance of medicine problems, especially when you go home. For example, you may:

- end up taking more medicines after you leave hospital
- be prescribed medicines that can cause serious problems
- have to take your usual medicines differently
- be given a different brand of medicine from the one you usually take.

TIP: If you have just spent time in hospital, ask your doctor or pharmacist to check your medicines. You can ask to have a family or whānau member with you when your new medicines are explained to you before you leave the hospital.

5. Seeing many health professionals

All the people involved in your healthcare need to know about all the medicines you are taking, including over-the-counter medicines from a pharmacy or supermarket and complementary medicines such as herbal remedies, vitamins and supplements. This will help to make sure they have all the information they need when prescribing or recommending medicines for you.

TIP: Keep an updated list of the medicines you are taking (also called a 'yellow card'), including non-prescription medicines (over-the-counter medicines, herbal remedies and vitamins or supplements), and tell all the people involved in your healthcare about all the medicines you are taking.

6. Taking medicines not prescribed for you

Problems can also happen if you take a medicine left over from a previous illness or a medicine that is not prescribed or recommended for you. What's right for one person or medical condition may not be right for you, and what was right for you in the past, may not be now.

TIP: Don't share medicines with other people, even if they have the same health problem as you, and take your old medicines back to your pharmacy once you no longer need them.

Need more help?

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