

Q: My mother takes seven medications. How can I be sure that she is safe taking all these drugs?

A: You are right to be concerned. Between 40% and 60% of all prescription drugs are not taken properly. More than 125,000 people each year die as a direct result of taking their medications incorrectly. In some cases, elders have suffered extensive disabilities from improper use of drugs. Seniors are the most likely to run into medication problems because they are more likely to be taking multiple prescriptions. There are currently more than 9,000 drugs on the market, with 100 more being added each year. The best antidote to this problem is medication education - helping seniors understand their drugs, and lowering the chance of misusing them. For older people who may be too frail or disoriented to closely follow such information, a caring family member is just the right prescription. It is also important that family members ask their doctor or pharmacist to take the time necessary to explain how to take each and every medication properly. One pharmacist noted recently that consumers need to take more responsibility to educate themselves about the medications entering their body. "Most people know more about their VCRs than about their medications," he said. "It's a tragedy when all of our impressive diagnostic skills and treatment resources are squandered because a patient didn't take a \$5.00 prescription properly." To protect elders from medication misuse, the Kaiser Permanente health plan suggests that consumers take the following 10 questions to the doctor's office, and write down the answers for each medication prescribed:

- 1.** What are the names -- both brand name and generic -- for this drug?
- 2.** For what medical problem is this drug being prescribed? Is it going to treat a symptom, or is it going to cure the problem?
- 3.** Does this medication work right away, or over several hours' time and what does it do inside the body?
- 4.** How often is this drug to be taken -- regularly or as needed to treat a symptom?
- 5.** When and how should this medication be taken (with/without food, at certain times of the day)?
- 6.** Are partial doses (such as split tablets) available and acceptable?
- 7.** What should be done if a dose is missed?
- 8.** What side effects are possible or likely, and what should be done about them?
- 9.** Can this medication be taken with other medications -- specifically with the other medications I am now taking (list them)?

10. Are less expensive generic forms of this drug available, and would it make sense to try them? When visiting with the doctor, prepare a list of all medications the elder is taking, including any over-the-counter varieties, plus any vitamins or herbs. Family members should keep a copy of such a list in their possession as well. Simple education about prescription drugs could save tens of thousands of lives each year. To receive a free written questionnaire with these 10 prescription questions, call the Elderline at 1 - 800-AGE-INFO.

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