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Ten Tips For Ensuring Medication Safety

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People over the age of 65 represent 14% of the US population but consume more than one-third of prescription medications. The average senior citizen uses more than five different medications each day. This does not count nonprescription, over-the-counter drugs. As many as 90% of seniors also use herbal remedies and vitamins. While there is risk associated with each type of medication - including side effects, allergic reactions or interactions with food, alcohol or other drugs - the risk is magnified in seniors as they are typically more sensitive to these effects.

Well known practitioners and educators in clinical pharmacology and internal medicines, maintain that it is imperative that caregivers educate themselves about the proper use of medications:

From avoiding the risk of interactions, to understanding and following instructions for storage and dosing, the following suggestions may help to ensure safe and effective use of medications:

1. Be familiar with the dosage instructions - including whether a drug should be taken with food, with milk or other fluids or on an empty stomach. Not following the dosage instructions can result in a medication being less effective or causing complications. It is also important to note that in most medicines recommended dosages are determined using trials with a younger population. In many instances, seniors may require a different dosage.
2. Familiarize yourself with circumstances under which the medicine should not be taken - including a history of allergic reactions, existing conditions, etc. This is particularly true for the elderly who generally have a number of medical conditions which younger adults do not have.
3. Understand the storage instructions and follow them. Because of moisture and heat, it is sometimes best not to store medicines in the bathroom.
4. Be aware that there may be warnings to avoid heat, cold or sun when taking a medication. Some medications may cause great sensitivity to sunlight resulting in severe sunburn or skin eruptions which can be dangerous. In addition, it may be necessary to avoid excessive heat or cold when taking certain prescription medications. In such cases, saunas, whirlpools and even exercise in the heat of the day should be greatly limited or avoided completely. It should be noted that seniors are particularly vulnerable to extremes of heat and cold.
5. Be aware of instructions about avoiding particular foods and/or alcohol. Particular foods and beverages may be off-limits when taking certain medications. Grapefruit juice, a favorite among seniors, for instance, can interact with a number of medications and render them ineffective. It is equally important to find out if dietary supplements may be required when taking a particular drug. Some medications may deplete the body of nutrients. Consequently, a patient's diet may need to be adjusted accordingly.
6. Understand what possible side effects may occur and watch for them. Be particularly mindful of reactions or symptoms that should be reported to a doctor immediately. It is important to note that medicines often affect senior citizens differently than younger adults. What may be an innocuous reaction in a younger person may in fact be much more serious for a senior. Be vigilant about educating yourself on possible drug-related reactions and