



## Handle With Care: Medication Safety for Older Adults

Alex Bishop, Ph.D.

Associate Professor, Human Development and Family Science

Gina Peek, Ph.D.

Assistant Professor and  
Extension Housing and Consumer Specialist

Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Fact Sheets  
are also available on our website at:  
<http://osufacts.okstate.edu>

### Older Adults and Medication Use

Many older adults (age 65 and older) live with one or more health conditions. These include arthritis, heart disease, hypertension and diabetes. Multiple medicines are often used to treat these health problems.

### Did you Know?

Adults age 65 years and older use more than one-third of all prescribed medicine (National Institute on Drug Abuse, 2014).

### Preventing Medication Misuse and Reducing Risk

Misuse of medicine can result in injury or death. Every day, more than 6,000 people are treated in hospitals for medicine misuse (U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2015). Many prescription drug-related deaths are caused by:

- Self-treating without asking a doctor
- Sharing medicine with family or friends
- Taking the wrong dose of medicine
- Taking two or more narcotic pain medicines

### Medication Safety Risks

Older adults most at-risk for using medicine the wrong way include those who:

- Live alone
- Complain about memory
- Take three or more prescribed medicines
- Visit more than one doctor
- Use more than one pharmacy
- Buy medicine from websites

### Follow Medication Directions

Many older adults use more than one medicine. This increases risk of misuse or adverse side effects. Using medicine the wrong way can result in a medical emergency (US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2012). Make a medication list and review it once a year. Share this list with your doctor or pharmacist.

### Taking Medication

Some medicines should not be taken together. Medicines should be taken only as directed. Read and save all written instructions. When taking a new prescription:

- Be sure your name is on the label
- Ask your doctor or pharmacist how to read the label
- Report any allergies or a side-effects to your doctor or pharmacist

### Store your Medicine Safely

- Store in the original package
- Store in a locked cabinet
- Store in a cool and dry place
- Do not store near food
- Use a pillbox to hold a one-week supply

### Reduce risk of Misuse, Abuse and Poisoning!

Many medicines can be harmful. Never let family, visitors, children or pets take your medicine.

- Create, update and review a list of all medicines you take
- Write down the day and time you take medicine on a calendar or notebook

## Properly Dispose Medication

Most medicines expire in one year. Do not store or discard out-of-date or unused medicines where family members, small children, home visitors and pets can find them. Dispose any expired or unused medicines:

- Remove all names, address and phone numbers from the label
- Contact a local pharmacy or health department to find a Take-Back Program
- If you cannot find a Take-Back Program, contact local law enforcement
- If law enforcement cannot be reached, dispose of expired or unused medicines on your own
  - Fill a sandwich or plastic baggie with kitty litter or used coffee grounds
  - Place the out-of-date or unused medicine in the bag
  - Do not crush or dissolve
  - Seal the bag and place in the trash for pickup
- Some medicine can be flushed down your toilet; the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has a list of medicines safe to flush (2015)
- If you have a septic system, do not flush any medications

Sometimes, older adults make mistakes taking medicine. Using medication after age 65 is often complex. Managing multiple health conditions requires instruction from different medical providers. This can be confusing. Older adults should take medicines wisely for their personal safety.

**Made a medication mistake?  
Contact poison control immediately  
at 1-800-222-1222.**

## References

- National Institute on Drug Abuse. (2014). Prescription drug abuse: Older adults. Retrieved February, 2015, from <http://www.drugabuse.gov/publications/research-reports/prescription-drugs/trends-in-prescription-drug-abuse/older-adults>
- U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2012). Adults and older adult adverse drug events. Retrieved February, 2015, from [http://www.cdc.gov/MedicationSafety/Adult\\_AdverseDrugEvents.html](http://www.cdc.gov/MedicationSafety/Adult_AdverseDrugEvents.html)
- U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2015). Prescription drug overdose in the United States: Fact sheet. Retrieved February, 2015, from <http://www.cdc.gov/homeandrecreationsafety/overdose/facts.html>
- U.S. Food and Drug Administration. (2015). Disposal of unused medicines: What you should know. Retrieved February, 2015, from <http://www.fda.gov/drugs/resourcesforyou/consumers/buyingusingmedicine-safely/ensuringsafeuseofmedicine/safedisposalof-medicines/ucm186187.htm - MEDICINES>

## Reviewers

Gloria King, Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service  
Susan Routh, Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service  
Margaret Scott, Oklahoma Home and Community Education, Inc.  
Mark Stratton, Pharm.D., BCPS, CGP, FASHP, The University of Oklahoma

Oklahoma State University, in compliance with Title VI and VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, Executive Order 11246 as amended, and Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 (Higher Education Act), the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, and other federal and state laws and regulations, does not discriminate on the basis of race, color, national origin, genetic information, sex, age, sexual orientation, gender identity, religion, disability, or status as a veteran, in any of its policies, practices or procedures. This provision includes, but is not limited to admissions, employment, financial aid, and educational services. The Director of Equal Opportunity, 408 Whitehurst, OSU, Stillwater, OK 74078-1035; Phone 405-744-5371; email: [eeo@okstate.edu](mailto:eeo@okstate.edu) has been designated to handle inquiries regarding non-discrimination policies; Director of Equal Opportunity. Any person (student, faculty, or staff) who believes that discriminatory practices have been engaged in based on gender may discuss his or her concerns and file informal or formal complaints of possible violations of Title IX with OSU's Title IX Coordinator 405-744-9154.

Issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension work, acts of May 8 and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Director of Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service, Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, Oklahoma. This publication is printed and issued by Oklahoma State University as authorized by the Vice President, Dean, and Director of the Division of Agricultural Sciences and Natural Resources and has been prepared and distributed at a cost of 20 cents per copy. 0415 GH.