

SAFE MEDICATION MANAGEMENT FOR SENIORS



Well-managed medications are essential for good health

Taking multiple medications is a way of life for most older adults. And taking it **correctly** is essential for treating health conditions and managing symptoms.

[Studies](#) show that 87% of seniors take one prescription drug, 36% take 5 or more, and 38% use over-the-counter medications. That's why medication management for seniors is such an important topic.

Putting a simple system in place and taking care of the basics helps seniors avoid common medication mistakes like taking the wrong drug, missing doses, or taking more than prescribed.

We share 10 important steps to take when helping your older adult safely manage their medications and include some helpful tools.

1. Gather all medications, vitamins, OTC meds, and supplements into one location

If they're all stored in different locations, it's easy to lose track of medications, vitamins, over-the-counter medications, or supplements that are being taken.

For example, some older adults might keep certain pills in the kitchen, some on their bedside table, and others in the bathroom medicine cabinet. It's especially important to include over-the-counter medications because they could negatively interact with prescription medications.

A good habit is to gather **everything** into one place. That way, you can see exactly what is being taken, make sure similar prescriptions aren't being prescribed for the same health condition, and dispose of expired medications.

To stay organized and increase medication safety, keep all the pill bottles and packages in a clear plastic storage bin ([like this](#)). You'll be able to store them more securely and make sure everything stays together. Even better, store medications they're currently taking in one bin and use a separate bin for the [backup supply](#) or meds that are only occasionally used.

2. Make sure medication is stored properly

In general, medication should be kept in a cool and dry place. That means the bathroom cabinet *isn't* a good place to keep meds – moisture and heat can affect drugs. Medications should also be kept safely away from children or pets.

Important: For medication that requires specific storage, like refrigeration, follow the doctor or pharmacist's instructions.

3. Create and maintain an up-to-date medication list.

To prevent negative drug interactions, it's essential to know exactly what medications your older adult is taking. That's why it's so important to always have an up-to-date list of their medications, vitamins, supplements, and over-the-counter medications.

Be sure to record:

- Names of each prescription medication, over-the-counter medication, vitamins, and supplements
- How often each item is taken
- What dosage of each item is used
- The healthcare provider who prescribed each prescription medication
- The purpose of each item and/or symptoms it's supposed to treat
- Whether each item is for short-term or long-term use

4. Pre-sort medications for the week

Staying organized is essential to good medication management for seniors. Using a pill organizer allows you to help your older adult pre-sort their medications for the week.

The best type of pill organizer for your older adult is one with enough compartments for every dose they'll need throughout the day. For example, [this one](#) has 28 total compartments – 4 doses each day for 7 days.

If any pills need to be split, it may be best to do this ahead of time and include those halves in the pill organizer compartments. That way, your older adult won't need to fumble with a pill cutter or remember to split pills before taking them.

5. Double check for negative drug interactions

Many older adults are taking multiple medications, vitamins, over-the-counter medications, or supplements. That's why it's important to double-check to make sure none of them cause serious negative interactions.

To make sure there aren't any interactions that the doctor or pharmacist could have missed, use an [online drug interaction checker](#).

6. Make sure medication instructions are clear

With medications, it's important to follow the doctor's instructions. That minimizes the risk of negative drug interactions, side effects, and the drug losing effectiveness.

Make sure you and your older adult understand which medications are safe to take at the same time and which need to be spaced out to prevent negative side effects. Some medications need to be taken on a full stomach while others need an empty stomach.

If there's any uncertainty, don't be afraid to ask the doctor for explanations and detailed instructions. Their job is to make sure the medications will work effectively and the only way that can happen is if they're taken correctly.

7. Set up a medication reminder and tracking system

With so many medications, it can be tough to remember when to take each dose. A medication reminder system and tracking log can help your older adult know that they've taken the correct meds at the right times.

A simple way of tracking when medications were taken is to take notes with paper and pen. You could create a simple chart with the medication name and dose, day, and time of day. As your older adult takes each dose, they record a check mark or X. Filling out this chart helps both them (and you) know that doses weren't missed. They won't have to wonder – hmmm, did I take my morning dose already?

To help remember when it's time to take medicine, there are a variety of ways to set reminders. Some older adults might like to set a series of alarms on their mobile phone. Tech-savvy seniors might find a medication management app (like [this one](#)) useful.

If your older adult isn't tech-savvy and only takes a couple of doses per day, a basic alarm clock could work well. For others, a telephone-based reminder might work better and allow for more doses through the day – check out these [services that offer medication reminder phone calls](#).

8. Understand the likely side effects of medications

Knowing about the potential side effects and drug interactions helps you watch out for any health changes that could happen after your older adult starts a new medication, increases dose, or combines medications differently.

If you do notice changes, contact their doctor right away. Common side effects could increase fall risk, upset the stomach, cause pain or weakness, and more. Some side effects could even [mimic other health conditions, including dementia](#).

9. Help seniors with Alzheimer's or dementia with their medication

If your older adult seems confused about their medicine or has been diagnosed with [Alzheimer's](#) or [dementia](#), they will likely need help with their medication.

Their cognitive impairment means that a reminder system may not be helpful enough. And taking medications incorrectly could cause serious harm to their health.

10. Plan ahead for medication refills

With long-term prescription medications, it's essential to get refills on time so your older adult won't run out and miss doses.

The most convenient solution is to ask the doctor to prescribe a 90 day supply through a mail-order pharmacy. That way, the medication will be mailed and you'll only need to remember to re-order every few months.

Many pharmacies also offer automatic refills and will notify you when the prescription is ready to be picked up. Some pharmacies may also have prescription delivery services so you won't have to pick them up.

New online pharmacy services like [PillPack](#) or [Phil](#) offer delivery and medication coordination services. **Note:** These companies cannot dispense Schedule II drugs like oxycodone, codeine, and opiates.

The last resort is to mark the refill dates on your calendar so you'll always remember to order a refill and pick it up **before** it's needed.