

Taking Prescribed and OTC Medications

Taking Medications

If your doctor has told you that you have a kidney problem, he or she may prescribe medicines for you. Or, you may be taking medicine for other health problems.

Medicines are used to treat disease and to help reduce symptoms so you feel better. Some may do just one of these things, others may do both. Remember, over-the-counter (OTC) drugs are medicine, too. Some over-the-counter medicines are not safe for people who have kidney disease.

Before you take any new medicine, even a vitamin, ask your doctor if it is safe for you.

Medicines work best if you take them the right way—the way your doctor prescribed them. If the cost of your medicines is a problem, talk to your care team. The VA has prescription benefits. Learn more about the [VA prescription benefit](#).



Your Kidneys & Liver Remove Medicine Wastes from Your Blood

When your body uses medicines, they are broken down into wastes. These wastes must be removed from your blood, or they could build up to unsafe levels. Your liver removes some medicine wastes. Your kidneys remove some as well. And, some wastes are removed by both the liver and the kidneys.

When a new medicine is prescribed for you, ask the pharmacist if your liver or your kidneys will remove the wastes. If your kidneys must remove the wastes, ask to be sure the dose is safe for you if your kidneys don't work at 100%.



Ways to Take Medicines

Most medicines are given in one of three ways:

- As a pill, capsule or liquid you swallow
- As a liquid that is injected into the skin or muscle
- As a liquid that is flowed into a vein



When they can, doctors try to prescribe pills or capsules.

But, some medicines work better or last longer if they are given by other routes. Stomach acid destroys some medicines (like insulin), so they can't be given by mouth.

There are other ways that medicines can be given, too. Some can be given with a skin patch. Some are sprayed under the tongue. Suppositories are put into the rectum. Some medicines are inhaled, like asthma treatments.

How to Take a Pill, Softgel, or Capsule

Do you find it hard to swallow pills or capsules? These tips may help:

- Pills and softgels are heavy, and they sink. Take a sip of liquid, put the pill in your mouth, and look up at the ceiling. The pill and liquid will go to the back of your throat where they are easy to swallow.
- Capsules float. Take a sip of liquid, put the capsule in your mouth, and look down at the floor. The capsule will float to the back of your throat where it is easy to swallow.



[Click on image to enlarge](#)

Some people find that taking a whole pill or a capsule in a spoonful of a soft food, like pudding, helps them to swallow.

Tell Your Doctor if You Have Side Effects

Any medicine can have side effects. These may be good—minoxidil is a blood pressure pill that has the side effect of helping hair grow. But, in most cases side effects are annoying, painful, or even harmful. Or, you may have an allergy to a medicine.

Some side effects will go away in time. Some will go away if you take a medicine in a certain way—like with food or on an empty stomach. Some won't go away, and you will need to change to a new medicine or learn to get used to them if the medicine is helping your health problem. Always tell your doctor about side effects you notice. He or she may be able to help.



Photo Credit: Ms. Chanel Weaver (USACE)

Some Medicines Can Interact Badly — Watch for Symptoms

When you take two or more medicines, they may not work well together. Pharmacists have lists of problems that can occur when two medicines are taken. But when you take more than two, no one can predict what may happen.

Know your body. Make a note when you start a new medicine so you can see if it seems to be causing a new symptom or making an old one worse. If you have a new symptom, tell your doctor and your pharmacist. You may need a change in medicine, in the timing of when you take it, or in the dose.

Use this [symptom diary](#) to keep track of your symptoms. Ask your VA provider about any of your symptoms. You can call his/her office, use secure messaging (available through MyHealthVet), or bring the symptom diary to your next clinic appointment.



Some Foods Can Interact with Medicines, Too

Some foods and drinks can be unsafe with prescription medicines, too. Grapefruit and other citrus fruit and juice can keep some medicines from breaking down, so they can build up to harmful levels in your body.

You may be taking medicines that are broken down by your liver. Adding alcohol puts an extra strain on your liver. Ask your doctor and your pharmacist if there are any foods or drinks that you should avoid when you take a medicine.



Herbs and Folk Remedies are Medicines—Tell Your Doctor

Sometimes people think that if a doctor doesn't prescribe a product, it's not a "real" medicine. Wrong!

Medicines include:

- Vitamins
- Herbal products
- Folk or traditional remedies
- Over-the-counter (OTC) products like pain pills, antacids, cold remedies, etc.

Just because something is "natural" or an herb does not mean that it is safe for you. When your kidneys don't work as well as they should, wastes from these products can build up in your body and harm you. Or, they can react in bad ways with prescribed medicines you take.

For example, some antacids contain aluminum or magnesium. These can harm you when your kidneys don't work well. Always tell your care team about ALL medicines you take—prescribed or not.



Know Your Medicines and What They Do for You

You owe it to yourself to know the basics about ALL of the medicines you take. That way, you can help keep mistakes from being made. It's rare, but sometimes the wrong pills are put in the bottle at the drugstore. Or, two products with names that sound alike are mixed up. Don't let this happen to you. Ask your care team about each medicine that is prescribed for you. It is important to know the following about each medication you take:



- What each medicine is called
- What health problem it is for
- What it looks like
- When to take it
- What to do if a dose is missed
- What side effects may occur

Labels Can Help You Take Medicines the Right Way

A prescription label has a lot of information about a medicine. (You may need reading glasses to see it!) The label will tell you the brand and generic name, the dose, how to take it, and how many refills you get. The label will also have your name, the pharmacy's name, and your doctor's name. There will be a prescription date and a use-by date, too.



Make a System to Help Yourself Remember

It can be hard to remember to take medicines each time you should. And, the more pills you need, the harder it can be. Figure out a way to remind yourself. Some people use pill boxes or timers on a watch or cell phone. Or, your care team may have a card with your medicines on it. Ask about it. If not, maybe you can make one for yourself.



Medicine Can Look Like Candy – Use Childproof Bottles

Each year, children are poisoned by adult medicines—like iron pills. Keep your medicines in bottles with childproof lids if there are ever any children in your home (even if they just visit now and then). If it's hard for you to open a childproof lid, talk to the pharmacist. There may be an option that will work better for you.

