

Reference: Adapted from Partners in Wellness, module 8, N. Carolina Cooperative Extension Service, Jacquelyn McClelland et al., 1999.

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K-State Nutrition PAGE – Practical Advice for Good Eating

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Increase Your Safety of Taking Medications

Older adults often have a long-term illness that requires taking medicine, such as arthritis, high blood pressure, heart disease or diabetes. On average, people age 65 years and older take two to seven prescription medications each day and fill more than 14 prescriptions a year.

1. Know about your medications. Use a magnifying glass if you need one to see the small print on the label. Write down the facts about each prescription and all over-the-counter products that you take regularly. Take them with you when you go to get health care or go on a trip. Be an informed consumer.

2. If you have questions, ask your doctor and pharmacist. Explain any problems you are having. If a medicine is too hard to take, or is too expensive, say so. Perhaps you could take a different kind. Write down your questions before the appointment.

3. Take medicine as directed. You might set an alarm clock as a reminder to take a dose. Never take a double dose or drugs prescribed for someone else. Refill your prescriptions before you run out of medicine. Discard drugs according to their expiration dates. Tell your doctor before you stop taking a drug, since suddenly stopping some medicines is dangerous.

4. Keep track of whether you took your medicine. Ask your pharmacist for help in getting a system in order to remember whether you have taken a medication dose.

5. When you get a new prescription, show the doctor your list of medicines and over-the-counter products. If you are seeing several doctors, they may not be aware of other drugs you are already taking.

6. Take all over-the-counter products by advice of your doctor. Be careful when mixing medications. Harmful interactions can occur between drugs. Some non-prescription products are harmful if taken with other medicine. Use of vitamins, minerals, herbals, other supplements, antacids, laxatives, pain medicines, cold remedies and other "pills, powders and potions" can lead to serious problems.

7. Use only one pharmacy, in order to prevent harmful medication interactions. Keep your pharmacist aware of everything you take.

8. Keep a record of your side effects, and report them to your doctor soon. Report if your medicine seems to work differently. Be honest about how you take your medication and how the medication affects you.

Drug side effects can affect nutritional health



Taking three or more different prescribed or over-the-counter drugs a day can put one at greater risk of poor nutritional health. Older adults have two to five times more drug side effects than younger people do. In older people, drugs sometimes take longer to be absorbed and broken down, stay in the tissues longer and leave the bloodstream at a slower rate. You may not experience any side effect, or it may disappear quickly. Some side effects occur after you have been taking the medicine for a long time.

Examples of side effects might include: depression, upset stomach, dizziness, constipation, diarrhea, weight loss, weight gain, nausea, shortness of breath, dry mouth, loss of appetite, swelling, cramps, or blood in the urine or stool.

Drugs can interact with foods, alcohol, nutrients or caffeine. This can make you lose nutrients, become dizzy or unsteady, or sick. Some medicines work more quickly when you take them with food or alcohol. Others work more slowly, and other medications do not work at all with certain foods or with any foods or alcohol. Some drugs decrease your ability to absorb nutrients. Some increase your need for certain nutrients.

The following side effects may be severe enough to interfere with good nutrition.

- Being less hungry, which can lead to too much weight loss, frailty and disability. Eat small meals, and high calorie favorite foods often.
- Being hungrier, which can lead to too much weight gain.
- Nausea, vomiting and diarrhea, which can lead to dehydration and loss of nutrients. Avoid food odors and liquids with meals. Eat dry, bland foods slowly.

- Constipation, which can lead to bowel conditions. Eat high fiber foods.
- Dry mouth and changes in taste sensation, which can lead to eating less food. Add sauce, gravy, soup, milk to foods for moisture and flavor. Drink liquids with meals.
- Indigestion or heartburn, which can lead to eating less food.

By eating a healthful diet, you can protect yourself against nutritional deficiencies caused by the drugs you take. Talk with your dietitian, doctor or pharmacist about foods to eat to replace any nutrients you may be losing because of your medications. Eat enough food, even if your medicine takes away your appetite. Eat foods that are high in vitamins and minerals and other nutrients, including whole grains, fruits, vegetables, and milk and protein foods. Avoid foods that interact with your medicine.