



Would you drive a car without fastening your seatbelt? Or hop on a bike without putting on a helmet? For most of us, the obvious answer is no. We like to think we're doing our best to protect ourselves and those we love. And often we are. But sometimes we don't realize what we could or should be doing. This is especially true when it comes to medication safety.

Playing It Safe:

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You and Your Medication

If we asked Albertans if they thought they were safety conscious when it came to their medications, what would the answer be? Probably a resounding yes. After all, it should be relatively simple to be safe when you only take something once in a while for the odd headache or sore throat. But is it?

Today we are surrounded by an overwhelming number of medications, some prescribed by health professionals, others known as non-prescription medications and still others in the form of herbal and nutritional supplements. Not surprisingly, it's sometimes hard to keep it all straight. And it's even more complicated for someone taking multiple medications or for someone with special needs like a child, senior citizen or pregnant woman. Overall, most of us probably handle our medications more by good luck than good management.

We can all take a more active role in our own medication safety, as well as the medication safety of those we love. *Health Report to Albertans* has some of the information and tools that can help you play it safe with the medicines you use.

Could this happen to you?

A 7-year-old girl went to an urgent care centre with symptoms of an ear infection. The doctor prescribed 15 **mg** (milligrams) of codeine syrup every 4 hours as needed for 7 days. The pharmacist prepared the bottle of syrup with a label that read "give 15 **mL** (millilitres) every 4 hours as needed." The mother left the pharmacy with a bottle containing 600 mL of codeine syrup.

The mother thought 600 mL seemed like a lot of syrup compared to other prescriptions she had received of about 250 mL so she looked at the information on the label. From the information, she calculated that giving 15 **mL** equalled a 75 **mg** dose, which was significantly more than the 15 **mg** the doctor had ordered.

Fortunately, she returned to the pharmacy and asked the pharmacist to double check the original prescription. The pharmacist realized that **mL** (volume of liquid) was used instead of **mg** (dose of medication). The directions on the bottle should have read "give 3 **mL** every 4 hours if needed". This would then equal the dosage on the prescription the doctor had originally written.

The label was retyped and the mother went home with the correct amount of codeine syrup. There could have been a serious overdose problem if the mother had not caught the error before she started giving her child the medication. **If something seems unusual when you receive your prescription, don't hesitate to ask the pharmacist to double check the original prescription.**

Insert

- My Medication Checklist
- Personal Medication List



About the Health Quality Council's Report to Albertans

In the past few years, research in Canada and around the world has highlighted patient safety. This has resulted in increased public interest and awareness. Many health regions, governments and professional groups are collaborating to share information and look at their practices to improve safety in all areas of health care. While it's important for those involved in health care to address safety issues, it's also important to remember another key participant in improving the process – you. Albertans, whether as patients, clients, caregivers or members of the public, are vital partners in the quest to continually improve patient safety.

The Health Quality Council of Alberta (HQCA) is an independent organization legislated under the *Regional Health Authorities Act* that is engaged in gathering knowledge and translating it into practical actions that can improve the quality, safety and performance of Alberta's health system. Our purpose is not only to keep Albertans informed about important issues in the health care system, but also to facilitate improvement.

This is the Council's third report to Albertans. In this and future reports, we'll feature information about relevant health topics that focus on quality and safety, many of them identified by you, our readers. This year our focus is medication safety. The best place to get information about the medicines you take is your doctor, pharmacist or nurse. While information is available on websites, in books and in the news, it's not always accurate. This report draws together information from a variety of credible sources. It also provides some tools to help you become a partner in your personal medication safety.

For more information about how to contact the Health Quality Council of Alberta or to suggest future topics, check the back page of this report.

Are You an Advocate for Your Medication Safety?

In spring 2004, the HQCA conducted the *Alberta Patient Safety Survey*, where 37% of respondents indicated they or a family member had experienced a preventable medical error while receiving service within Alberta's health care system any time throughout their lives.

Preventable errors involving medications were the second most common error the respondents described when they discussed the type of medical error that had occurred.

Medication errors included:

- wrong prescription given/received
- incorrect dose
- medication not given when needed
- drug interaction
- medication taken for too long
- unnecessary medication
- ingredients not listed properly
- wrong route of administration

The good news is that when used correctly, medicine can make you feel better or even save your life. The bad news is no medicine is 100 per cent risk free. It's up to you to learn about the benefits and risks of every medication you or a loved one is taking. And it's up to you to learn how to take each medication safely. Just like you automatically fasten your seatbelt each time you're in a car, you need to pay the same attention to the medicines you take... before you open the bottle.

You're in the driver's seat when it comes to medication safety. Using medication properly depends on many little things that you can control. **When in doubt, ask.** Your health care provider (e.g., doctor, pharmacist or nurse) or the **24/7 Medication & Herbal Advice Line** (see page 7) can give you the facts you need to take your medicines correctly.

Throughout this report, we use the terms health care team and health care provider. These include people that prescribe medicine for you or are involved in some aspect of your medication therapy.



What You Can Do about Medication Safety

When taking care of yourself or a family member, there are a number of simple things you can do to make sure you're getting the most from your medicine.

- Read the label on the package and the enclosed information every time.
- Follow the directions carefully. If you have trouble understanding the directions, ask the pharmacist before you leave the pharmacy or call the pharmacy phone number on the prescription label.
- Get professional advice before you mix prescription or non-prescription medications, vitamins, supplements or herbal products.
- Build a relationship with one pharmacist or team of pharmacists so they know your prescription history and health needs.
- If you start taking a new medicine, herbal remedy or dietary supplement, talk to your health care provider about how this may affect you.
- Remind your health care provider about any allergies you have, any new allergies, or negative reactions you have had to other medications.
- Tell your pharmacist, doctor or other health care provider if you don't feel well after taking a prescription or non-prescription medication. If you think you're experiencing side effects or having a reaction, get help right away.
- Ask your health care provider if it's safe to drink alcohol or drive with your medicine.
- Bring a friend or family member when you visit a health care provider or take notes if it will help you understand the medication better.
- Keep an up-to-date record of all the non-prescription and prescription medications, dietary supplements and herbal remedies you take. Share this with your health care provider each time you visit. See the attached insert for tips on how to prepare this list.

Ask your health care provider before combining more than one non-prescription medication. Many medications contain more than one ingredient. Taking two medications with the same ingredients could result in taking too much of one of the ingredients.

For example, taking Advil® for a headache and Dristan Sinus® for a head cold would result in taking double the amount of ibuprofen because it is present in both preparations.

Playing It Safe

- 1. David Thompson Dispensary**
3942 - 50A Avenue
Red Deer, AB
T4N 4E7

Phone: 343-4802

Name, address and phone number of pharmacy/drug store that dispensed the prescription. Any questions about the prescription can be answered by calling the pharmacy.

- 2. TEST PATIENT**

Name of patient for whom the prescription was filled. Check to make sure it is your name.

- 3. Rx 330100**

Prescription Number. This number identifies the prescription in the pharmacy computer system. The pharmacist may ask for this number when you are calling about your prescription.

- 4. Dr. Dispensary**

Name of the health care provider who wrote the prescription. Check to make sure it is correct.

- 5. 26 - MAY - 2006**

Date prescription was filled.

- 6. 30 TAB**

The quantity (e.g., 30 tablets) of the medication.

- 7. Tamoxifen Citrate 20 mg**

Generic name and strength of the drug. Several companies may make the same drug (same generic name) but call it different trade or brand names.

- 8. Brand name: Novo-Tamoxifen 20 mg**

Trade or brand name of drug dispensed.

- 9. DIN 00851973**

Drug Identification Number that is unique for the specific drug and strength manufactured by the company.

- 10. TAKE ONE TABLET DAILY**

Instructions on how to take the medication.

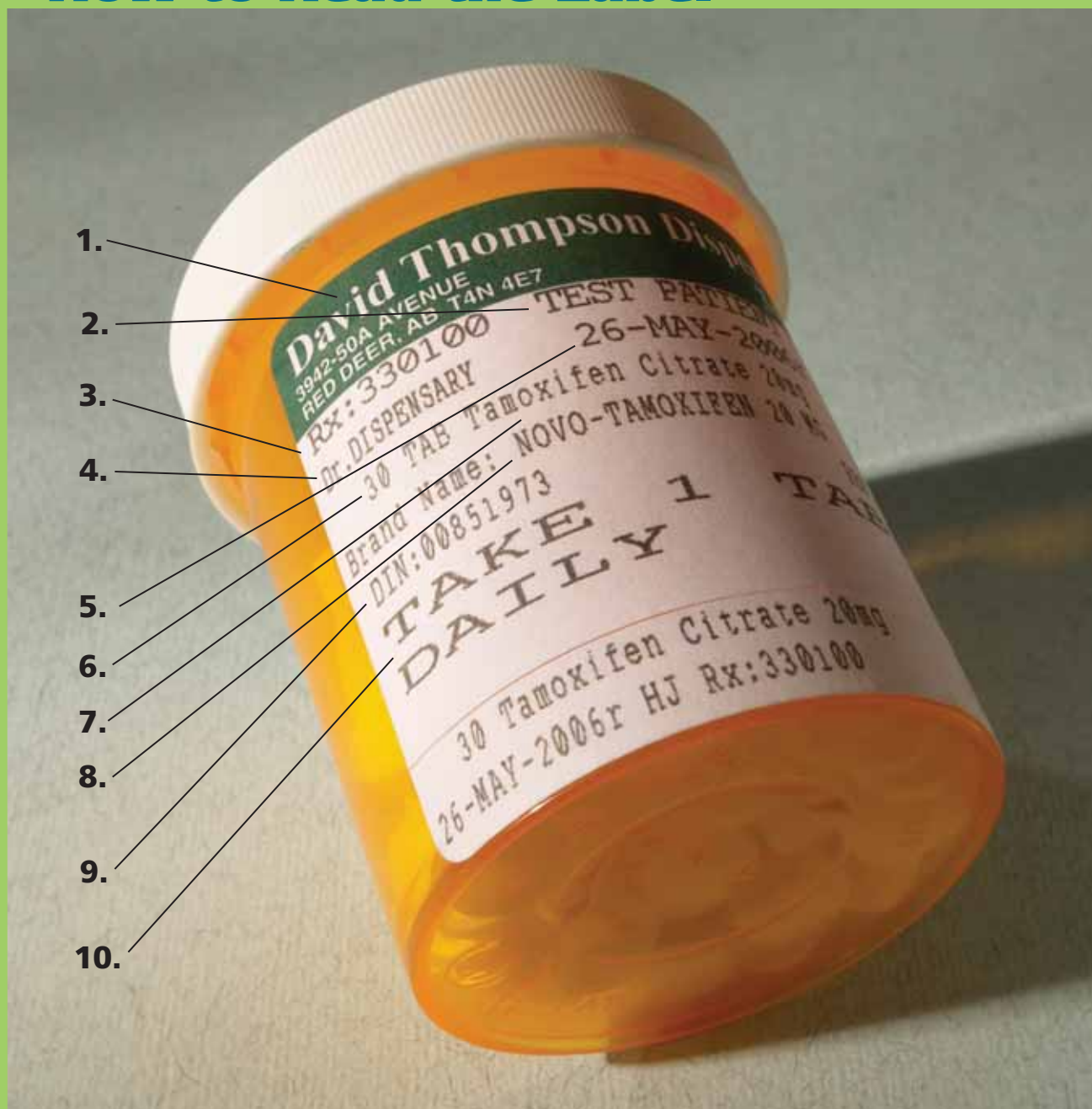
- 11. Refills: 1**

Indicates the number of times a prescription may be refilled.

- 12. TAKE WITH FOOD**

Additional label applied by pharmacist to help you remember how and when to take the medication.

How to Read the Label



Using Non-Prescription Medications Correctly

From coughs and colds to fevers and the flu, most of us don't hesitate to use non-prescription medications to clear our heads, calm our stomachs or curb a cough. Even though non-prescription medications are safe when taken as directed, they are still serious medications. And just like you follow your doctor's or pharmacist's advice when taking a prescription medication, you also need to know how to take non-prescription medications the right way.

1. If you take prescription medications, ask your doctor or pharmacist before taking a non-prescription product.
2. Ask your pharmacist which non-prescription medicine is best for you and how and when to take it.
3. Read the label. Non-prescription medications are serious medicines that can harm you if taken incorrectly. Understand the ingredients, directions and warnings.
4. Choose non-prescription medications that have only the medicinal ingredients you need.
5. Take only the dose recommended on the label.
6. Non-prescription medications are for temporary relief of minor symptoms. If the condition persists or worsens, contact your doctor.



Mixing It Up:

Interactions happen when one medicine interferes with another medicine, with food or even with some laboratory tests. This can change the way one or both of the substances act in the body or can cause unexpected side effects or incorrect laboratory results. There are many potential interactions involving prescription medications, non-prescription medications, vitamins, herbal remedies and even certain foods. We've listed just a handful of examples.

As the non-prescription and herbal market grows and becomes more popular, the potential for increased interactions increases. Talk to your doctor or pharmacist or call the 24/7 Medication & Herbal Advice Line at **1-888-944-1012** for more information about these products and how they interact with each other or your prescription medications.

The Dangers of Medication Interactions

1. **Aspirin** or drugs like ibuprofen (e.g., Advil®) called NSAIDS combined with blood thinners like warfarin (e.g., Coumadin®) can lead to excessive bleeding.
2. Certain **antacids** may prevent medications like antibiotics, blood thinners and heart medications from being absorbed into the blood.
3. **Decongestants** in many cold formulas may cause increased blood pressure, which may be of concern for people being treated for high blood pressure or depression.
4. **Calcium-rich dairy products, antacids, iron supplements and vitamins containing iron** can all decrease the effectiveness of antibiotics, particularly tetracycline.
5. **Dextromethorphan**, a common cough medicine, when taken with some antidepressants, can result in toxic levels of dextromethorphan and cause significant drowsiness or loss of consciousness.
6. **Ciprofloxacin**, an antibiotic, and **ginkgo**, a herbal product, can increase the effect of blood thinners like warfarin (e.g., Coumadin®), which may lead to excessive bleeding.
7. **Antibiotics** decrease the effectiveness of oral birth control pills.
8. **Kava kava** is a popular herb taken to reduce stress that may cause increased drowsiness if taken with muscle relaxants, sleeping pills or antidepressants.
9. **St. John's Wort** is a herbal remedy used to treat depression. If taken with prescription medications used to treat depression such as Paxil® or Prozac®, there is a risk of increased drowsiness and decreased ability to think clearly.
10. **Grapefruit juice** prevents the body from breaking down some medications so they can be excreted. This can result in receiving higher than intended doses of the drug. For some medications, it can prevent the body from absorbing the drug so concentrations in the blood may be lower than expected.

Medication Safety at Home and at Play

Medicine is powerful stuff. But medicines that heal can also harm if you don't take them correctly. Whether at home or at play, there are many small things you can do that can make a big difference when it comes to keeping you and those you love medication savvy.

In Your Home

- Turn the lights on every time you take a medication to make sure you have the right drug and are following the instructions.
- Don't stop taking your medicine, even if you start feeling better or think it's not working, until you've consulted with your health care provider. Stopping suddenly may cause side effects or could make your illness worse. Stopping your antibiotics before you are finished taking them all may result in the medication becoming less effective against the bacteria next time you have the same kind of infection.
- Store tubes of ointment or creams away from your tube of toothpaste. They might feel alike and a mistake could be serious.
- Don't chew, crush or break capsules or tablets unless your pharmacist or doctor tells you to. Chewing causes some long-acting medications to be absorbed too quickly, which could be unsafe. It can also reduce the effectiveness of some medications or make you sick.
- Take only your own medicines. Taking someone else's medicine may hide your symptoms and make diagnosing your illness more difficult or may be harmful to you if the medicine isn't right for you or your condition.
- Know your medicines. If you take more than one medicine, be able to tell them apart by size, shape, colour, number or name imprint or form (tablet or capsule).
- Organize your medicines. If you take more than one medicine, a chart or written schedule can help you keep track of what to take and when. Containers with different colour caps or different sections can also help you manage multiple medications.
- Get prescriptions refilled before you run out to keep your medicine schedule on track.

Be Kid Smart

Curious minds and tiny hands mean you can never be too cautious when it comes to medicine and kids. Here are some precautions every parent, caregiver and grandparent should take to prevent accidental poisonings.

- Give babies and children only medicines formulated for their weight and age. Cutting adult strength tablets in half or trying to estimate a child's dose of an adult-strength liquid can result in an accidental overdose. Giving older children liquid medicines that are meant for babies can also lead to dosing errors.
- Know your child's weight in kilograms (1 kg = 2.2 lbs) so you can give the proper dose of a non-prescription medication as recommended on the product label.
- Use the specific dropper, dosing cup or other measuring device that comes packaged with your child's medicine. Don't guess.
- Turn on the light when giving medicine.
- Teach children that medicines are not candy and they shouldn't touch, smell or taste them on their own.
- Avoid taking medications in front of children. They might try to imitate you.
- Avoid putting medications (including used analgesic or nicotine patches) in garbage cans accessible to children or pets. Many adult medications can be deadly to small children and pets.
- Understand that vitamins, particularly those containing iron, can be poisonous if taken in large doses.



Safe Storage and Disposal

- Clean out old medicines. Check the expiration dates on medications every six months. Take outdated medications to a pharmacy for disposal. Don't throw them in the garbage or flush them down the toilet.
- Get rid of any medication not in its original container or if you can't read the label.
- Dispose of any medication that has changed colour, shape, consistency or smell.
- Never keep more than one medication in the same container.
- Beware of bathroom medicine cabinets. Humidity can reduce a medication's strength.
- Direct sunlight and extreme heat or cold can affect how medicines work. Storing medicine on top of the refrigerator isn't a good idea as the increased temperature can decrease its effectiveness.
- Refrigerate only medications that need to be kept cold. Read labels or ask your pharmacist if your medicine has any specific storage conditions.
- Store all of your family's medicine in the original child-resistant containers in one place where children can't see or reach them. A locked box or cabinet works well.
- Keep medications for people separate from pets' medications or household chemicals. Mix ups are common and can be dangerous.

At Play

- Before you travel, ask your health care provider how to adjust your medication schedule to account for changes in time, routine and diet.
- Be proactive when it comes to vaccinations or other medications that will keep you well. Your health care provider or local travel clinic can recommend what you need. Remember that certain vaccinations should be given several weeks or months ahead to be effective so don't leave them until the last minute.
- Bring the phone numbers of your doctors and pharmacists with you. If you lose your medicine, you may need a new prescription. Keep a list of all the medications you take.
- If you need to administer your medication with a needle (e.g., insulin), carry your prescription with you to ease your way through airport security.
- If you're visiting a foreign country, be aware of buying non-prescription medications. Many medicines available by prescription in Canada are available without a prescription in other countries. These medications could have different ingredients and may not pass Canadian quality control standards.
- If you're on a plane, keep medicines in your carry-on bag. Keeping them with you helps prevent exposure to extreme temperatures in the baggage compartment that can alter the drug's effectiveness.
- Transport your medications in their original, labelled containers.
- If you're visiting a hot, humid place, keep medicines in a cool, dry place out of direct sunlight. Never store them in the glove compartment of the car.
- Allow for the unexpected. Take along more medication than the number of days you plan to be away.
- Many medications can cause you to be more sensitive to the sun. Even if you don't usually burn, some medications could greatly increase your chances of getting a sunburn.



Need Help? Call:

24/7 Medication & Herbal Advice Line

1-888-944-1012

(toll free in Alberta)

(VOIP subscribers may need to dial
403-944-1012)

- If you have questions about medications or herbal preparations.
- If you want help to make more informed and safer medication decisions.
- If you think you may be having side effects.
- If you are pregnant or breast-feeding and have questions about the safety of medicines or herbal products on your baby.
- If you need help to understand your medications better.

In case of a poisoning, call:

24/7 Emergency Poison Centre Line

1-800-332-1414

(toll free in Alberta)

(VOIP subscribers may need to dial
403-944-1414)

These services provide credible, personalized and research-based advice and information to supplement the advice and information you receive from your primary health care provider. It is staffed by a qualified and experienced team of health experts including pharmacists, nurses and doctors.

For brochures and other educational materials:

www.padis.ca

or telephone (403) 944-6900

Poison & Drug Information Service

1403 29 Street NW

Calgary, AB T2N 2T9

www.hqca.ca



Whether you're in the hospital, at the doctor's office or at the pharmacy, the single most important way you can stay healthy is to play an active part in your own care. This means being prepared. Here are some simple things you can do.

In the Hospital

- When you are admitted to hospital, bring a list of medications you are taking. If there isn't time to make a list, bring the medications in their original containers. Tell the doctor or nurse if you have changed the way you are taking your medication from what was originally prescribed. Remember to mention any allergies you have including medications, foods or latex.
- Ask your doctor or nurse why you're being given a new medicine and how it will help. Ask for written information about it, including brand and generic names.
- Ask about possible side effects of your medicines.
- Tell someone if you think you're about to get the wrong medicine.
- Know what time you normally get a medicine. If you don't receive it, tell your nurse or doctor.
- Look at all medicines before you take them. If it doesn't look like what you usually take, ask why. It might be a generic drug or it might be the wrong drug.
- Make sure the information on your hospital identification bracelet is correct. Don't let anyone give you medications without having them check it every time. This helps prevent you from getting someone else's medications.
- You may be asked many of the same questions or have your identification bracelet checked by different members of the health care team. This is a normal part of a long list of checks and balances to ensure your safety.
- Before any test or procedure, ask if it will require any dyes or medicines. Remind your health care provider if you have allergies.
- If you receive intravenous (IV) fluids, check the bag for the name of the contents or ask your nurse. If you're not well enough to do this, ask a family member or friend to do it for you.
- Tell the nurse, doctor or hospital pharmacist if you don't feel well after receiving a medication. If you think you are having a reaction or experiencing side effects, ask for help immediately.
- Before you leave the hospital, make sure you understand the instructions for the medicines you need to take at home. Understand what you're taking, why you're taking it, how you might react, what to do if you experience a reaction, how to store it and how long you need to take it.
- It's okay to ask questions. Hospitals understand the responsibility they have to patients and families. They have checks and balances in place to make sure medications are used safely and effectively. But health care providers also encourage patients to take responsibility for themselves.

Remember that you are the final check in the list of checks and balances to ensure your safety.



Keeping track of several medicines can be difficult. The good news is there are lots of different options that make managing your medicines easier. Here are a few ideas:

- Containers that separate pills for every day of the week.
- Blister packs that package the medications you need for a week or more at a time. All medications that need to be taken at the same time are in the same blister package.
- Calendars to check off.

Talk to your pharmacist or health care provider about finding the right system for you.

At the Doctor's Office or Pharmacy

- Take your medication list every time you visit your doctor or pharmacist, especially if you see more than one. Make sure each of your health care providers is aware of medications that others have prescribed for you. This includes non-prescription medications, vitamins and herbal supplements. Remind them if you have allergies.
- Ask your doctor to explain what is written on any prescription including the medication name and how often you should take it.
- Ask your doctor to write the purpose for the medication on the prescription. Knowing the purpose helps you and the pharmacist double check the prescription.
- If your doctor gives you samples, make sure he or she checks to be sure there are no interactions with other medications you are taking. Check the expiry date on the package to make sure the medication is still okay to use. Make sure you have clear instructions about how to use the samples, especially if the doctor does not label them.
- Check the information on the label when you get the prescription filled at the pharmacy. Make sure it has your name on it and the correct medication name.
- Before you leave, repeat the instructions back to your pharmacist or doctor. This could clear up misunderstandings that might cause problems later.

Seniors

As we get older, many of us develop more health conditions that need to be treated with medications. While these medicines often enhance or maintain our quality of life, they also can complicate things. Using more medications combined with normal body changes caused by aging make seniors more vulnerable to unwanted or harmful drug events. Here are a few things that can help seniors cope with some of the challenges.

- Use a calendar, pill box or other system to help you remember what medications to take and when.
- Write down information your health care provider gives you about your medicines or health condition.
- Bring a friend or family member to your doctor's appointments and to your pharmacy if you think it will help you understand or remember what you're told.
- Ask questions or if you're uncomfortable, get someone to ask them on your behalf.
- If you have difficulty reading, make sure you ask for verbal instructions.
- Keep your medications safely out of reach of visiting children.

Pregnant or Breastfeeding Mothers

- Hormones can affect how medicines work in women's bodies, especially during the menstrual cycle and pregnancy.
- To avoid risk to the baby, pregnant or breastfeeding women should consult their health care provider before taking any medicines.



Multiple Medication Users

If you take more than one medication, you could be at increased risk for significant and sometimes serious interactions involving non-prescription medications, vitamins, herbal remedies and even certain foods. This particularly applies to people with chronic health conditions such as diabetes, heart disease or high blood pressure.

If you're taking several medicines, it's important to have an updated medication list every time you visit your doctor or pharmacist, especially if you see more than one. This includes non-prescription, homeopathic, vitamin, herbal and nutritional products.

The **24/7 Medication & Herbal Advice Line (1-888-944-1012)** is an additional resource for you to call if you have any questions or concerns.

As the story on the front cover illustrates, sometimes you need to look for clues that could alert you to a mistake with your medication. First make sure your name is on the prescription label and is spelled correctly. Check with your health care provider before taking your medicine if:

- The appearance (colour, shape, markings on tablet) is different than you expect.
- The smell is different than you expect or is extremely unpleasant.
- The amount of liquid in a syringe or bottle is more or less than you expect.
- The number of pills in a prescription bottle is more or less than you expect.
- The directions on a prescription bottle are not what your doctor told you.
- The name of the medication on the bottle is not what you expect.

- The reason for taking the medicine (on the prescription bottle, in a leaflet or mentioned by the health care provider) is different than the condition you are treating.

Serious errors with medication are rare but they do happen. If you think a mistake was made, talk to your pharmacist, nurse, doctor or other health care provider.

Here are some things you and your family can do:

- Ask what the probable outcome/impact of the error will be and how it should be treated.
- Ask for a full explanation of why the error occurred.
- Ask for an explanation of how the error will be prevented from happening again.
- If you have suggestions about how to prevent medication errors, share them with your health care provider.



Q & A Corner

Why do medications have more than one name?

All medications have a generic name. Several manufacturers may produce a medication and they will each apply a unique trade name to their product. They usually choose brand names that are easier to pronounce and remember than the generic name. For example, Advil® is a brand name for a medication used to treat pain. Its generic name is ibuprofen.

What should I do if I hear something on the news about a medicine I'm taking?

Contact your doctor, pharmacist or the 24/7 Medication & Herbal Advice Line. They are your first and best source of information. Remember to tell them where you heard or saw the information (e.g., name of the newspaper or radio or television station). The medication and herbal advice line staff will track the original story as well as any scientific information related to the news story and will try to put it into perspective for you.

If I double the prescribed dose of my medication, will it be twice as effective?

The instructions that appear on the label of your medicine explain how to take it. Doubling a dose may be dangerous. Doses are based on many factors including age, weight and health condition. By altering the dose, you could increase the potential for side effects and dangers associated with certain products without increasing effectiveness. If your medicine is not providing relief or acting fast enough, talk to your pharmacist, doctor or the 24/7 Medication & Herbal Advice Line. Doubling the dose may provide no benefit and may actually harm you.

Are antibiotics always necessary?

Antibiotics are prescribed to fight certain types of infection. While they are strong and effective, they must be prescribed based on the type of infection and used according to specific instructions (e.g., taken at certain intervals and for a minimum number of days). If your health care provider prescribes antibiotics, it's important to take all of the prescribed medicine. Antibiotics have no effect on viruses so don't be surprised if your health care provider won't prescribe any for a bad case of the flu. By NOT taking unnecessary antibiotics you are actually protecting yourself from developing resistance to the drug and making it ineffective if you really need it later on.

What is an over-the-counter (OTC) medication?

An over-the-counter medication is a drug available without a prescription. Another term for this is non-prescription medication.

Web Wise

Here are some websites where you can find more information about medication safety.

www.ahrq.gov

www.bemedwise.org

www.ismp-canada.org

www.ismp.org

www.bemedwise.ca

www.padis.ca

www.talkaboutrx.org

www.worthknowing.ca



The HQCA's Role in Medication Safety

Since its inception, the Health Quality Council of Alberta (HQCA) has been committed to collaborating with our stakeholders to create a high-quality, safe health system for every Albertan. We have several initiatives underway directly related to medication safety.

The Pharmacy Directors Network was established in 2005 to develop a medication safety agenda for Alberta. Members include Alberta health region pharmacy directors and quality improvement staff, the Alberta Cancer Board pharmacy director and quality improvement staff, Alberta College of Pharmacists and Health Quality Council of Alberta.

Priorities include:

- An opioid management survey to identify common issues around narcotic storage and management to provide opportunity for discussion and design of collaborative projects for medication system enhancements. Workshops were held in every health region across the province to share the results of the survey as well as recommendations and strategies for improvement. Forty-four sites participated, with 284 frontline health care providers taking part in the workshops.
- The ISMP-Canada Medication Safety Self-Assessment for Hospitals was also completed.

These surveys provided valuable data and recommendations for improvement that are now serving as the foundation for an action plan to make changes in our health system and improve medication safety. In addition, over the next year the group will launch an initiative aimed at eliminating the use of error-prone medication abbreviations, symbols and acronyms.

We know that for every initiative we begin, there are many more waiting in the wings. As we move forward, we remain committed to advancing the quality and safety agenda in this province. Together with our stakeholders we are working for continuous improvement in Alberta's health care system.

When it comes to medication safety, each of us has a major role to play. While we rely on the expertise of health care providers, we all have a responsibility to ask questions, to be informed and to take an active role in medication safety. We hope *Health Report to Albertans* provides some of the information and tools you need to play it safe with medications for you and those you love.

Glossary

Active ingredient:

The ingredient in the medicine that works with your body to bring relief to the symptoms. For example, non-prescription pain relievers usually contain one or more of the following three different active pain relief ingredients: acetaminophen, ibuprofen or aspirin.

Adverse or negative reaction:

A response to taking a medication or food that may appear as nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, constipation, headache, dizziness or drowsiness.

Allergy:

A reaction to taking a medication or food that may appear as hives, rash or immediate trouble breathing or swallowing.

Drug-alcohol interactions:

The result of taking an alcoholic drink that can react with the medication you are on. For example, mixing some medicines with alcohol may cause you to feel tired or slow your reactions.

Drug-condition interactions:

The occurrence of potentially harmful side effects when a medical condition you already have makes certain drugs potentially harmful.

Drug-drug interactions:

The result of two or more medicines reacting with each other to cause unwanted effects. This kind of interaction can also cause one medicine to not work as well or even make one medicine stronger than it should be. The substances involved can be prescription medications, non-prescription medications and even vitamins and herbal products.

Drug-food interactions:

The result of drugs reacting with foods or drinks. In some cases, food in the digestive track can affect how a drug is absorbed. Some medicines may also affect the way nutrients are used or absorbed in the body.

Side effects:

Unplanned symptoms people sometimes experience when taking a medication. Most side effects are not serious and go away on their own. Others can be more dangerous. Also known as adverse effects or negative reactions.

Want More Details?

For additional copies, go to www.hqca.ca or call our office at (403) 297-8162. You may also complete the questionnaire online at www.hqca.ca. While you're visiting our website, take a look at some of the other initiatives we're involved in.

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Please take a moment to answer the following questions.

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Sources

The Health Quality Council of Alberta thanks the following organizations for generously allowing us to use their information in the preparation of this publication.

- Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality (AHRQ): *Check Your Medicines; Women and Medicines: What You Need to Know; Your Medicine: Play It Safe*
- American Society of Health System Pharmacists: safemedication.com, *Medications and You*
- Council on Family Health in co-operation with the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services: *Medicines and You: A Guide for Older Adults*
- Gouvernement du Québec: *Using Medication: If and as Required!*
- Institute for Safe Medication Practices (ISMP): *Learning from Mistakes; How to Prevent Medication Errors* (1800 Byberry Road, Suite 810, Huntingdon Valley, PA, USA, 19006 (215) 947-7797, www.ismp.org)
- Joint Commission on Accreditation of Healthcare Organizations: *Things You Can Do to Prevent Medication Mistakes*
- The Massachusetts Coalition for the Prevention of Medical Errors: *Your Role in Safe Medication Use*
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- U.S. Department of Health and Human Services: *As You Age... A Guide to Aging, Medicines and Alcohol*
- University of Arizona Center for Education and Research on Therapeutics: *Safe Medication Use*

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