

Preventing Medication Mishaps



Following these simple rules can help you prevent problems caused by interactions between medications, vitamins, supplements, and foods. It is one more way that you can be a good steward of a Veteran's health. It is also a good example of what it means to be a proactive Family Caregiver.

While you are following these steps to protect the Veteran's health, consider following them for yourself as well. Remember, your own good health is essential to your being an effective Family Caregiver.

1. Maintain an Up-to-date List

First and foremost, maintain an up-to-date list of everything the Veteran takes. List medications prescribed by doctors, but also list those purchased without a prescription such as aspirin, vitamins, and herbal supplements. These over-the-counter items can at times interact with prescription drugs and create serious problems. You are probably the only one who knows all the medications the Veteran is taking, especially if he/she sees multiple physicians.

- Be sure to list the name, dosage, and frequency of the medication (e.g., Warfarin 4mg, once a day), the reason for taking it (blood clot prevention), any dosing directions (may be taken with or without food), and the start date. For prescription drugs, add the name and number of the prescribing doctor, and the name and number of the pharmacy that filled the prescription.
- Be sure to put the Veteran's name at the top of the document and include your contact information (or someone else's) as the person to call in an emergency.
- Note any allergies or intolerances, or other significant medical information that might not be obvious.
- Make multiple copies, one for you to carry and one for the Veteran's personal medical file. Keep one on the refrigerator or the family bulletin board for paramedics to find, and send a copy to the Veteran's primary doctor.



- It is critical that you keep this record updated. Not only will an outdated record not do any good, but it may actually do some harm. Using a simple, computer-based document is one of the easiest ways to keep the record current.
- A medication list template is available on VA's Caregiver Support website on the [Staying Organized page](#).

2. "Translate" Handwritten Prescriptions

Don't be shy about asking all the Veteran's doctors to "translate" their handwriting so you can write down exactly what a prescribed medication is (name, dosage, etc.).

3. Write the Condition Treated on Each Medicine Bottle

On each medicine bottle, write the name of the condition it treats. You might find that the Veteran you care for is taking three different pills for the same condition, each prescribed by a different physician. That may be exactly what is needed, but it is definitely a red flag to alert you to ask questions.



4. Use the Same Pharmacy

Try to use the same pharmacy for all prescriptions. That way there will be an official record to match your personal record with all the Veteran's prescription medications listed over an extended period of time. It also means that the pharmacist will be able to see all of the Veteran's prescriptions and alert you to any potential issues or interactions.

5. Understand Potential Side Effects and Interactions

When a Veteran is prescribed a new medication, ask the Veteran's health care team and pharmacist about potential side effects and interactions with others drugs, vitamins, or foods. Monitor the Veteran for reactions and, at the first sign of trouble, call the doctor and report the specific symptoms you see.

Adapted, with permission, from the National Family Caregiver Association resource "Safe and Sound: Preventing Medication Mishaps."

