

# *Keeping Track of Your Medications*

By Lisa Staber, MD  
Health Focus Contributor

Roger's pill bottles were lined up on the shelf like chess pawns: a diuretic and an ACE inhibitor for high blood pressure, warfarin to protect against blood clots, a cholesterol-lowering statin, gout medication, a drug for his prostate-related urinary problems and an antidepressant.

Each pill comes with its own instructions for when and how it is to be taken plus its own profile of side effects and possible interactions with food or other drugs. To keep his memory on track, Roger uses a daily pill organizer, but even so he occasionally forgets to take a pill at its appointed time.

Roger's situation is not unusual. A recent survey found that about 30 percent of seniors take eight or more medications daily; 76 percent take at least three.

Whereas younger persons may be prescribed a drug, such as an antibiotic, for a specific length of time, seniors are more likely to be taking drugs indefinitely to manage chronic illnesses such as hypertension, coronary artery disease, diabetes or arthritis. When patients add over-the-counter remedies to battle colds, allergies, sleep problems or pain, the picture becomes even cloudier.

## **Do You Remember to Take Your Pills?**

It's easier to  
remember your pills  
if you link them to  
daily events  
such as:

- With breakfast
- Before you brush your teeth
- Following your morning walk
- With a snack in mid-afternoon

**– KEEP YOUR PILLS IN A PROMINENT PLACE –**



How do you manage with your medications? Do you sometimes forget to take a pill? Or deliberately avoid certain pills because of side effects, cost or another reason?

In a survey of Medicare patients conducted in 2003, before the prescription drug option (Medicare Part D) was added, 40 percent of respondents indicated that they sometimes did not take their medications as prescribed. Patients without drug coverage were more likely to be non-compliant, suggesting that cost was a major factor for some individuals.

There are many other reasons for non-compliance. The drug may have side effects that you don't like or it may not seem to be working, so you stop taking the medication or take it sporadically. By doing so, you get a triple penalty: 1) you don't get the benefit of a drug that you need for good health, 2) your doctor does not have a clear picture of the effects of the drug on your illness and 3) she may make other treatment decisions based on the assumption that you are taking the medication.

With most seniors, of course, it's an occasional miss, usually because of forgetfulness or confusion. The more medications you take, the more difficult it is to keep track of them, and that's the reason to have a daily pill container.

It's also easier to remember pills if you link them to daily events—before you brush your teeth, with breakfast, just after your morning walk or with a snack in mid-afternoon. Keep the bottles or your pill organizer in a prominent place and in the room where you're sure to be at the appropriate time.

As a service to help patients manage their medications, Medicare requires that each drug insurer

mail out a monthly summary of medications the patient purchases. These summaries include descriptions, prescribing information and pictures of each drug.

The prescription summary is something you can take to your doctor's appointment to initiate a discussion about your medications. If some of the drugs are too expensive for you, this is the time to bring up the matter.

If you're getting prescriptions from more than one doctor, it's important that each doctor have a complete list of all of your medications, including over-the-counter pills, vitamins and supplements. It's also advisable to get your prescriptions filled at the same pharmacy so that one more knowledgeable person is reviewing what you're taking and looking for any possible drug interactions.

Review your medications shortly after you receive them. Make sure you can read the label and understand instructions for use. Pills come in various sizes, shapes and colors precisely to help you identify them. Memorize the name, both generic and brand name, and try to associate it with the shape and color of the pill. Read and follow all of the warnings and instructional information carefully.

Drugs have come a long way from the days of the traveling medicine show. We now have at our disposal many powerful, finely tuned medications for uses ranging from lowering cholesterol to easing depression. Your use, misuse or non-use of those medications could well be a matter of life and death.

*Lisa Staber, MD, is a family practice physician at the NorthReach Healthcare Daggett Medical Clinic. For more information she can be reached at (906) 753-2155.*