

Managing Life-limiting Illness with Medicines

The more health issues you have, the more medicines you are likely to take. This may include medicines which are prescription only, nonprescription (over-the-counter) or complementary medicines.

Taking many medicines

Your medicines may come in many forms, including:

- Tablets and capsules
- Liquids
- Inhalers
- Patches
- Suppositories
- Injections.

Your medicines may be given regularly to stop an issue such as pain or nausea. You may have others that are prescribed on a 'just in case' basis if symptoms change quickly.

Palliative patients take on average five regular medicines and two 'just in case' medicines. Taking many medicines can increase the risk of problems.

Complementary therapies describe treatments that are used alongside conventional medical treatments. For example: herbal medicine, dietary supplements and tonics, and acupuncture.



Medicine interactions

Some combinations of medicines may make your medicines less effective, cause unexpected side effects, or increase the action of a particular medicine.

Food and alcohol may also interact with medicines. For some people their medical condition can make them more sensitive to the effects of the medicines they are using.

Regardless of what form your medicines come in or how they are obtained always check with your doctor or pharmacist to see if a new medicine may interact with your current ones.

Side effects

All medicines can cause side effects. This could be a reaction to a medicine such as a rash or diarrhoea. The drug company is required to list all possible side effects in the Consumer Medicines Information (CMI) leaflet.

You may only experience some, or none of these effects. Some may just be temporary, while others may be a sign of a bigger issue. Discuss all side effects with your doctor or pharmacist.

Practical ways to manage medicines:

- Keep a list of what medicines you have and why you are taking them. Take your lists to appointments
- Include complementary or alternative therapies you use in your list
- Make sure you have enough medicines to last over weekends and public holidays
- Watch for adverse effects, and monitor what is happening. Report adverse effects to the doctor
- Clarify with your doctor or pharmacist any changes to your medicines on discharge from hospital
- Dispose of unwanted medicines through your local pharmacy.

Your doctor or pharmacist may suggest a Home Medicines Review (HMR). This involves a pharmacist coming to your home to review the medicines that you are taking. You can ask your doctor or pharmacist how this can be arranged.

A dose administration aid is a way to organise your medicines so that they are easier to manage. Your pharmacist may be able to fill this regularly for you. There may be a cost for this service.

Cost of medicines

The Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme (PBS) subsidises many medicines registered for use in Australia. This means that you can get them at a lower cost from your local pharmacy. The government decides which medicines will be subsidised. It also decides how many repeats you get and if your GP needs to get special permission to prescribe it.

You may need to get a lot of prescriptions filled, and this can become costly. If you or your family use a lot of medicines, the PBS Safety Net helps with the costs. Once you have reached a certain limit, you and your family can receive medicines more cheaply for the rest of the calendar year. You may only need to take six regular medicines a month to be eligible.

More information

You can obtain more information about your medicines in the following ways:

- Discuss with your doctor or pharmacist
- Call the free National Prescribing Service 'Medicines Line' on 1300 MEDICINE (1300 633 424) from anywhere in Australia
- Call your local hospital and ask if they have a medicines information service
- Read the CMI leaflet available inside the medicine box or packaging.

CareSearch is a website that has been developed to provide trustworthy information about palliative care. For more information on this topic visit www.caresearch.com.au