

Safe and Effective Medication Use: Preventing Medication Errors

Everyone has a role in helping prevent medication errors. As a valued JM Health Plan member, here's a list of things you can do to safeguard your health.

1. Keep a list of all medications you are taking, including dosages and strengths. Include all medications such as prescription meds, over-the-counter med, vitamins and herbal or natural supplements. Share this list with your doctor and pharmacist and always have it available if you are hospitalized or treated in an emergency room.
2. When your doctor writes a new prescription, make sure you:
 - Know the spelling and purpose of the medicine. Write it down and ask your doctor to verify the information.
 - Understand when you can see improvement in your symptoms or condition.
 - Understand any potential side effects of the medication and what to do if they occur.
 - Know how and when to take the medication. For example, if the doctor says "three times a day," does this mean every eight hours, three times a day or at mealtimes?
 - Know how long you should take the medication.
 - Know what to do if you forget a dose.
 - Ask your pharmacist the same questions. Pharmacists are medication specialists and may be aware of additional side effects or drug interactions.
3. When given your new prescription, read the label and compare to what you wrote down at the doctor's office to make sure they're the same. Request the doctor to write legibly so you can also read the prescription.
4. Follow the doctor's instructions for taking the medication. Do not deviate from the original instructions unless directed by your doctor. For example, don't stop taking your medication just because you're feeling better unless your doctor tells you to stop.
5. Read the information your doctor and pharmacist gives you about the medication.

You also may want to refer to Aetna's on-line health information affiliate Aetna IntelliHealthSM, at www.intelihealth.com for additional information.

6. Some medications, such as those used to treat high blood pressure, may have uncomfortable side effects. Understand this may be a minor inconvenience as the medication works on the more severe, underlying problem. Don't hesitate to call your doctor or speak with your pharmacist if you're not feeling well.

7. Never share your prescription medications or take medications that were prescribed for someone else. Besides being dangerous to your health, it is also illegal.
8. Conduct periodic checks of your medicine cabinet. Look at expiration dates on all medications and discard those medicines past their expiration dates. Many medications lose potency over time and may become unsafe if used beyond the expiration date.
9. Check the prescription label for specific instructions on storing your medications. Most drugs should be stored in a cool (room temperature), dry cabinet and some drugs require refrigeration. Don't store your medications in exposed sunlight as some drugs deteriorate more rapidly when exposed to heat or humidity.
10. Keep all medications out of the reach of children. Have the phone number of your local poison control center readily available.