

A PRACTICAL GUIDE FOR FAMILY CAREGIVERS

10 Medication Interactions Every Family Caregiver Should Know About

Simple questions. Safer conversations. Better preparation.

Medication safety starts with the complete picture.

Prescription medicines, over-the-counter products, supplements, foods and alcohol can interact in unexpected ways. This guide highlights situations worth discussing with a doctor or pharmacist.

EDUCATIONAL GUIDE - PHARMACIST REVIEW PENDING

Never start, stop or change a medication without professional guidance.

A practical guide for safer medication conversations

Medicines help millions of older adults live healthier, more independent lives. But as prescriptions, over-the-counter products and supplements accumulate, it becomes easier to overlook a potentially harmful combination.

Older adults can be particularly vulnerable because age-related changes may affect how the body processes medicines. Taking multiple medications can further increase the likelihood of side effects and interactions.

This guide highlights 10 medication combinations and situations worth discussing with a doctor or pharmacist.

IMPORTANT

This guide is for general educational purposes only. It is not medical advice and does not identify every possible interaction. Never start, stop or change a medication without consulting a qualified healthcare professional.



Why this matters

A complete medication picture includes prescriptions, over-the-counter medicines, vitamins, supplements, foods and alcohol. Bring the complete list to every medication review.

How to use this guide

- Scan the 10 interaction situations and mark any that may apply.
- Write down questions instead of making medication changes yourself.
- Review the complete list with a pharmacist or prescribing professional.
- Keep the emergency guidance available for quick reference.

1 Blood Thinners + Common Pain Relievers

Look for:

- Prescription blood thinners such as warfarin, apixaban, rivaroxaban or dabigatran
- Aspirin
- Ibuprofen
- Naproxen

Blood thinners reduce the formation of blood clots. Aspirin and nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs, or NSAIDs, can also affect bleeding and may irritate the stomach.

Taking these products together may increase the risk of bruising, stomach bleeding or other serious bleeding. Sometimes a healthcare professional intentionally prescribes a combination, but it should not be added independently.

ASK THE PHARMACIST

“What pain reliever is appropriate with this blood thinner?”

Watch for: unusual bruising, prolonged bleeding, blood in the urine, black or bloody stools, vomiting blood, severe weakness or an unexplained severe headache.

2 Opioid Pain Medicine + Anxiety or Sleep Medicine

Look for:

- Opioids such as oxycodone, hydrocodone, codeine, morphine or tramadol
- Benzodiazepines such as alprazolam, lorazepam, diazepam or clonazepam
- Prescription sleeping medicines
- Other medications that cause significant sedation

These medications can slow activity in the central nervous system. When combined, they may cause extreme sleepiness, confusion, falls or dangerously slowed breathing.

ASK THE PRESCRIBER

“Do all of these sedating medications need to be taken together, and what warning signs should the family monitor?”

Call 911 immediately if the person: cannot be awakened, is unusually unresponsive, has blue or gray lips, or has slow, shallow or difficult breathing.

3

More Than One Product Containing Acetaminophen

Look for:

- Acetaminophen or Tylenol
- The abbreviation “APAP” on prescription labels
- Cold, flu, sinus and nighttime products
- Combination prescription pain medicines

Acetaminophen appears in hundreds of prescription and nonprescription products. Someone may take a pain reliever and a cold medicine without realizing that both contain the same active ingredient.

Taking too much acetaminophen can cause severe liver damage. The amount from every product must be counted toward the total daily dose.

CHECK THE LABEL

Look under “Active ingredients” for acetaminophen or ask a pharmacist to identify every product that contains it.

GET HELP

If an overdose may have occurred, contact Poison Help immediately at 1-800-222-1222, even if the person feels well.

4

Diabetes Medicine + Delayed or Missed Meals

Look for:

- Insulin
- Sulfonylureas such as glipizide, glimepiride or glyburide
- Changes in appetite, illness or skipped meals

Some diabetes medicines continue lowering blood sugar even when a person eats much less than usual. This can cause hypoglycemia, or dangerously low blood sugar.

The risk may rise when someone is ill, forgets to eat, changes meal patterns or accidentally takes an extra dose.

**ASK THE
HEALTHCARE
PROFESSIONAL**

“What should we do with this medication if a meal is skipped or the person is too sick to eat?”

Watch for: sweating, shaking, weakness, dizziness, confusion, irritability, blurred vision, unusual sleepiness or loss of consciousness.

Follow the person’s established diabetes action plan. Severe confusion, a seizure or unconsciousness requires emergency assistance.

5 Blood-Pressure Medicine + Decongestants

Look for:

- Pseudoephedrine or phenylephrine
- Multi-symptom cold, flu and sinus products
- A history of high blood pressure, heart disease or irregular heartbeat

Some decongestants narrow blood vessels and may raise blood pressure or heart rate. They may be inappropriate for certain people with hypertension or cardiovascular conditions.

Because decongestants frequently appear in combination products, the front of the package may not make the ingredient obvious.

ASK THE PHARMACIST

“Is this cold medicine safe with these blood-pressure and heart medications?”

Watch for: pounding or irregular heartbeat, severe headache, chest pain, shortness of breath or a marked rise in blood pressure.

6 Antihistamines + Sleep or Anxiety Medicines

Look for:

- Diphenhydramine, found in some allergy and nighttime products
- Doxylamine, found in some sleep aids
- Prescription sleep, anxiety or pain medicines
- Alcohol

Some older antihistamines cause considerable drowsiness. Combining them with other sedating substances can intensify sleepiness, confusion, impaired coordination and fall risk.

A product labeled “PM” or “nighttime” often contains a sedating ingredient.

ASK THE PHARMACIST

“Could this allergy or nighttime product increase confusion or fall risk with the other medications?”

Watch for: new confusion, excessive sleepiness, unsteadiness, difficulty waking or slowed breathing.

7 Certain Medications + Grapefruit

Grapefruit and grapefruit juice can change how the body absorbs or processes certain medicines. Depending on the medication, this may cause too much or too little of the drug to enter the bloodstream.

Potentially affected medicines include some:

- Cholesterol-lowering statins
- Blood-pressure medicines
- Heart-rhythm medicines
- Anti-anxiety medicines
- Transplant medications

Not every medicine in these categories interacts with grapefruit, and the effect varies by medication and person.

ASK THE PHARMACIST

“Does grapefruit, pomelo, tangelo or Seville orange interact with any medication on this list?”

Do not assume that separating grapefruit and the medication by a few hours eliminates the interaction.

8 Alcohol + Pain, Sleep or Anxiety Medicines

Alcohol may intensify the effects of many medicines. Possible consequences include excessive sleepiness, poor coordination, memory problems, falls, liver injury and dangerously slowed breathing.

Particular caution is appropriate with:

- Opioid pain medicines
- Benzodiazepines
- Sleeping medicines
- Sedating antihistamines
- Acetaminophen
- Certain antidepressants

Older adults may be affected by smaller amounts of alcohol than they were in the past.

ASK THE HEALTHCARE PROFESSIONAL

“Is any amount of alcohol considered safe with these medications?”

Never assume that a medicine is safe with alcohol simply because it is available without a prescription.

9

Prescription Medicines + Vitamins or Herbal Supplements

“Natural” does not necessarily mean interaction-free. Vitamins, minerals and herbal products can affect how prescription medicines work.

Examples worth discussing with a pharmacist include:

- St. John’s wort
- Ginkgo
- Ginseng
- Garlic supplements
- Vitamin K
- Potassium
- Calcium
- Magnesium

Possible effects include altered bleeding risk, changes in medication absorption, abnormal potassium levels or reduced effectiveness of a prescription.

REMEMBER

Include vitamins, minerals, herbal remedies, CBD products and nutritional supplements on the medication list.

ASK THE PHARMACIST

“Could any of these supplements alter the safety or effectiveness of the prescriptions?”

10

Different Products Containing the Same Active Ingredient

Duplicate ingredients are not limited to acetaminophen. Cough, cold, pain, allergy and sleep products frequently combine several medications in one package.

Someone might unintentionally take:

- Two antihistamines
- Two pain relievers
- Two decongestants
- A separate sleep aid plus a “nighttime” cold product
- A prescription and OTC medicine with similar effects

This can lead to excessive dosing, sedation, high blood pressure, bleeding or other side effects.

CHECK EVERY LABEL

Ignore the brand name initially and compare the “Active ingredients” sections.

ASK THE PHARMACIST

“Are any of these products duplicates, or do they have overlapping effects?”

Five Steps Families Can Take Today

1 Create one complete medication list

Include:

- Prescription medicines
- Over-the-counter products
- Vitamins and supplements
- Medication name and strength
- Dose and time taken
- Reason for taking it
- Prescribing healthcare professional

2 Use one pharmacy when practical

A pharmacist who can see the complete prescription history may be better positioned to identify potential conflicts.

3 Request a medication review

Ask a doctor or pharmacist to review the full list after a hospital visit, medication change or new diagnosis—and periodically when several medicines are involved.

4 Check before adding an OTC product

Cold remedies, pain relievers, allergy products and sleep aids can interact with prescriptions. Ask before adding one, even if it will only be used briefly.

5 Do not stop prescriptions independently

Some medicines can cause serious problems if stopped suddenly. Discuss concerns and side effects with the prescriber first.

When to Seek Immediate Help

CALL 911

Call 911 for symptoms such as:

- Trouble breathing
- Blue or gray lips
- Inability to wake the person
- Severe or sudden confusion
- Fainting or seizure
- Signs of stroke
- Vomiting blood
- Major or uncontrolled bleeding

POISON HELP

For a possible medication overdose or accidental double dose, call Poison Help at 1-800-222-1222. Do not wait for symptoms to appear.

Questions to Ask During a Medication Review

- What is each medication treating?
- Are any of these medications duplicates?
- Could any combination increase bleeding, confusion or fall risk?
- Does any medicine interact with food, alcohol or supplements?
- What should happen if a dose or meal is missed?
- Which side effects require an immediate call?
- Are all of these medications still necessary?
- Should any blood tests, blood-pressure readings or other monitoring be performed?

PREPARE FOR THE VISIT

Bring the complete list—and ideally the medication containers—to the appointment.

About AIVAcare



A dedicated home display for family connection

AIVAcare is a remote care system designed to help families care for older adults. Its dedicated home display provides conversational wellness check-ins, medication and appointment reminders, family messages, wellness updates and timely alerts when a concern is identified.

AIVAcare is a wellness-support system. It does not diagnose medical conditions, prescribe treatment, replace professional medical care or guarantee detection of medication interactions.

COMING SOON TO KICKSTARTER

Visit AIVAcare.ai to join the launch list and receive product updates, Kickstarter launch information and access to exclusive offers and rewards.

Medical Disclaimer

This guide provides general educational information and is not a substitute for advice from a physician, pharmacist or other qualified healthcare professional. Medication risks depend on the specific drug, dose, health conditions and other substances being taken.

Do not use this guide to make treatment decisions. Never start, stop, substitute or change the dose of any medication without guidance from an appropriate healthcare professional.

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Sources and additional information

The guide was synthesized from the following U.S. government health resources. Links are clickable in this PDF.

FDA: 5 Medication Safety Tips for Older Adults

Used for the overall discussion of aging, polypharmacy, medication lists, alcohol, foods, supplements and potential interactions.

National Institute on Aging: Taking Medicines Safely as You Age

Used for older-adult medication risks, mixing prescriptions with OTC products and supplements, duplicate active ingredients and the importance of professional review.

FDA: Drug Interactions - What You Should Know

Used for the distinction among drug-drug, drug-food, drug-alcohol and drug-condition interactions.

FDA: Acetaminophen

Used for the duplicate-acetaminophen warning, label checking, liver-injury risk and Poison Help recommendation.

FDA: Grapefruit Juice and Some Drugs Do Not Mix

Used for the grapefruit discussion and affected medication categories.

FDA: Opioids Combined With Benzodiazepines or Other CNS Depressants

Used for the warnings about extreme sedation, slowed breathing, coma and death.

FDA: Updated Benzodiazepine Boxed Warning

Used for benzodiazepine interactions with opioids and alcohol and the warning not to stop these medicines abruptly.

National Institute on Aging: Facts About Aging and Alcohol

Used for alcohol interactions with aspirin, acetaminophen, antihistamines, pain medicines and sleep or anxiety medicines.

MedlinePlus: Pseudoephedrine

Used for cautions involving decongestants, high blood pressure, heart disease, diabetes, glaucoma and other conditions.

CDC: Medication Safety Data

Used as background support for why medication safety matters to older adults, including adverse events involving anticoagulants and diabetes medicines.
