

**A Public Service Message  
from the Partnership for  
Safe Medication Use—  
Educating and Empowering  
the Health Consumer**

- American Medical Association
- American Pharmaceutical Association
- American Society of Health-System Pharmacists
- National Association of Chain Drug Stores
- National Council on Patient Information and Education
- National Patient Safety Foundation
- Pharmaceutical Research and Manufacturers of America
- United States Pharmacopeia
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U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH  
AND HUMAN SERVICES



FOOD AND DRUG  
ADMINISTRATION

(FDA) 02-3241

# Think It Through



## A Guide to Managing the Benefits and Risks of Medicines

Although medicines can make you feel better and help you get well, it's important to know that **ALL medicines, both prescription and over-the-counter, have risks as well as benefits.**

The **benefits** of medicines are the helpful effects you get when you use them, such as lowering blood pressure, curing infection or relieving pain. The **risks** of medicines are the chances that something unwanted or unexpected could happen to you when you use them. Risks could be less serious things, such as an upset stomach, or more serious things, such as liver damage.

When a medicine's benefits outweigh its known risks, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) considers it safe enough to approve. But before using any medicine—as with many things that you do every day—you should **think through** the benefits and the risks in order to make the best choice for you.

### There are several types of risks from medicine use:

- The possibility of a harmful interaction between the medicine and a food, beverage, dietary supplement (including vitamins and herbals), or another medicine. Combinations of any of these products could increase the chance that there may be interactions.
- The chance that the medicine may not work as expected.
- The possibility that the medicine may cause additional problems.

For example, every time you get into a car, there are risks—the possibility that unwanted or unexpected things could happen. You could have an accident, causing costly damage to your car, or injury to yourself or a loved one. But there are also benefits to riding in a car: you can travel farther and faster than walking, bring home more groceries from the store, and travel in cold or wet weather in greater comfort.

To obtain the benefits of riding in a car, you **think through** the risks. You consider the condition of your car and the road, for instance, before deciding to make that trip to the store.

The same is true before using any medicine. **Every** choice to take a medicine involves **thinking through** the helpful effects as well as the possible unwanted effects.

### How Do You Lower the Risks and Obtain the Full Benefits?

#### Car

- Wear a seatbelt.
- Drive defensively.
- Obey the speed limit and traffic laws.
- Avoid alcohol or medicines that could affect your driving ability.
- Keep your car in good repair.

#### Medicine

- Talk to your doctor, pharmacist, or other health care professionals.
- Know your medicines.
- Read the label and follow directions.
- Avoid interactions.
- Monitor the medicine's effects.

## Here are Some Specific Ways to Lower the Risks and Obtain the Full Benefits of Medicines



### Weighing the Risks, Making the Choice

The benefit/risk decision is sometimes difficult to make. The best choice depends on your particular situation.

You must decide what risks you can and will accept in order to get the benefits you want. For example, if facing a life-threatening illness, you might choose to accept more risk in the hope of getting the benefits of a cure or living a longer life. On the other hand, if you are facing a minor illness, you might decide that you want to take very little risk. In many situations, the expert advice of your doctor, pharmacist, or other health care professionals can help you make the decision.



### Talk with Your Doctor, Pharmacist, or Other Health Care Professionals

- Keep an up-to-date, written list of ALL of the medicines (prescription and over-the-counter) and dietary supplements, including vitamins and herbals, that you use—even those you only use occasionally.
- Share this list with ALL of your health care professionals.
- Tell about any allergies or sensitivities that you may have.
- Tell about anything that could affect your ability to take medicines, such as difficulty swallowing or remembering to take them.
- Tell if you are or might become pregnant, or if you are nursing a baby.
- Always ask questions about any concerns or thoughts that you may have.

### Know Your Medicines—Prescription and Over-the-Counter

- The brand and generic names.
- What they look like.
- How to store them properly.

- When, how, and how long to use them.
- How and under what conditions you should stop using them.
- What to do if you miss a dose.
- What they are supposed to do and when to expect results.
- Side effects and interactions.
- Whether you need any tests or monitoring.
- Always ask for written information to take with you.

### Read the Label and Follow Directions

- Make sure you understand the directions; ask if you have questions or concerns.
- Always double check that you have the right medicine.
- Keep medicines in their original labeled containers, whenever possible.
- Never combine different medicines in the same bottle.
- Read and follow the directions on the label and the directions from your doctor, pharmacist, or other health care professional. If you stop the medicine or want to use the medicine differently than directed, consult with your health care professional.

### Avoid Interactions

- Ask if there are interactions with any other medicines or dietary supplements (including vitamins or herbal supplements), beverages, or foods.
- Use the same pharmacy for all of your medicine needs, whenever possible.
- Before starting any new medicine or dietary supplement (including vitamins or herbal supplements), ask again if there are possible interactions with what you are currently using.



### Monitor Your Medicines' Effects—and the Effects of Other Products that You Use

- Ask if there is anything you can do to minimize side effects, such as eating before you take a medicine to reduce stomach upset.
- Pay attention to how you are feeling; note any changes. Write down the changes so that you can remember to tell your doctor, pharmacist, or other health care professional.
- Know what to do if you experience side effects and when to notify your doctor.
- Know when you should notice an improvement and when to report back.

**Remember: Think it Through and Work Together with Your Doctor, Pharmacist, or Other Health Care Professional to Better Manage the Benefits and Risks of Your Medicines**