



Think It Through: Managing the Benefits and Risks of Medicines

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For many people, taking medication is a regular part of their daily routine, and these medicines are relied upon to treat disease and improve health. 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. Here are some tips from the Food and Drug Administration and some of its public health partners to help you weigh the risks and benefits when you make decisions about the medicines you use.

Managing Risk

When a medicine's benefits outweigh its known risks, the 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. 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.

Here are some specific ways to lower the risks and obtain the full benefits of medicines:

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

- Keep an up-to-date, written list of all 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 them about any allergies or sensitivities that you may have.
- Tell them about anything that could affect your ability to take medicines, such as difficulty swallowing or remembering to take them.
- Tell them if you are or might become pregnant, or if you are nursing a baby.
- Always ask your health care professional 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 whether 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 whether there are possible interactions with what you are currently using.

Monitor Your Medicines' Effects--And the Effects of Other Products That You Use

- Ask whether 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.

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.

About IFFGD

The International Foundation for Gastrointestinal Disorders (IFFGD) is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit education and research organization. We work to promote awareness, scientific advancement, and improved care for people affected by chronic digestive conditions. Our mission is to inform, assist, and support people affected by gastrointestinal disorders. Founded in 1991, we rely on donors to carry out our mission. Visit our websites at: www.iffgd.org.

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