



## Managing Multiple Medications

*by Josie Padro*



It might start with a pill to take the edge off some knee pain, then maybe thyroid hormone replacement medication to boost the body's waning supply, later another collection of pills to control an irregular heartbeat. Over the years we or those we care for can end up having to take a surprising array of medications— and it requires major effort to make sure they're taken correctly – some with food, some on an empty stomach. Sometimes we have to learn skills like taking blood sugar readings and giving ourselves injections.

Figures collected in 2005 by Health Canada found the average number of prescriptions filled that year by Canadians was 14. People between the ages of 60 and 79 had an average of 35 prescriptions filled and those over 80 had an average of 74.

There's no doubt that medications are life saving; they also enable many of us to maintain a good quality of life. However, there's growing concern among health professionals and seniors that taking multiple medications may not be as healthy as intended. That's because while every medication has its intended benefits, it can also have unintended side effects or interact adversely with other drugs being taken. Those adverse reactions could be anything from drowsiness to confusion, falls, or incontinence.

Even seemingly benign over-the counter medications can cause problems. For example the common anti-inflammatory Aspirin can add to the effects of anticoagulants, also known as blood thinners, possibly leading to a lowered ability to form blood clots – not a good state to be in if you have a fall or a car accident. Introduced in 2007 PharmaNet, a database administered by the BC Ministry of Health and the College of Pharmacists, keeps track of all

medications prescribed to BC residents pharmacists, hospitals, mental health facilities and some general practitioners. It also stores important information about allergies, medical conditions as well as MSP numbers.

The PharmaNet helps prevent duplicate prescriptions and is especially useful when someone is admitted to hospital or relocates to a different BC community. As a central source of information, it allows pharmacists to assess all the medications prescribed to one person and to flag any potential incompatibilities.

### **What you can do**

While it's reasonable to expect health care providers and pharmacists to make sure we're not given unnecessary medications, as health care consumers we are also responsible for our own health. Making sure we know what medications we're taking and why we're taking them is the most important way to prevent complications that can result from taking too many medications. [The following suggestions may help:](#)

**Keep a tab on the tablets.** Maintaining an up to date medication list is the first step – that includes supplements and herbal remedies.

**Place a copy of this list in your wallet** so you can refer to it during visits to your doctor or in case of emergency.

**Get to know the drugs you're taking.** Most medications come with a fact sheet; even when you're refilling a prescription give this sheet a careful read. There may be new information you need to know.

**Ask questions.** Many of us are reluctant to take up our doctor's time, but most health professionals will take the time to explain because they know that when patients have the proper information they are more likely to follow their treatment and avoid complications.

[The following are examples of questions you may ask:](#)

What does the medication do? How, when and for how long do I take the medication?

Are there any foods or other drugs I should avoid while I take this medication?

What side effects should I watch out for and what should I do if they occur? How soon will the medication take effect?

**Take medications as directed.** To be effective, medications need to be taken at the right dose and frequency. If you feel you need to cut back or need a higher dose, contact the health professional who prescribed the medication and let them know.

Those on a tight budget may try to stretch their dollar by taking only half the prescribed dose; some may choose not to purchase the medication at all. If cost is a barrier, there are may be help available.

Low-income BC residents could be eligible to have the entire cost of their medications, or the majority of it, paid by Fair PharmaCare. To find out if you qualify contact Health Insurance BC at 604-683-7151.

**Use an organization tool.** Drug stores and medical equipment stores sell pill organizers that can help group the medications that need to be taken throughout the day. You may also ask your pharmacist to package your pills in blister packages. Some pharmacies charge a small fee for the service and it may take a while depending on the complexity of the medications you're taking. Blister packages can accommodate anywhere from a week to a month's supply of pills.

**Get to know your pharmacist.** These professionals have completed years of scientific study and understand the complex drug actions and interactions. They also have access to extensive data bases including PharmaNet. Part of their job is to teach people how to take their medications safely and to ensure no adverse effects occur.

Getting to know all about our medications or those of a loved one can be a little overwhelming, but the more we know about those medications the better.