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LEP

Questions to Ask About Medications and Herbal Supplements



A Guide for Parents | Leslie E. Packer, PhD

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Leslie E. Packer, PhD

This handout was prepared to assist parents in being informed consumers of medications prescribed for their children - although the questions apply equally well to adults. The questions were inspired by own experiences as a parent of children on multiple medications and as the daughter of a pharmacist who taught me to always be concerned about safety and drug interactions.

1. What is the name of this medication?

If you have trouble remembering the names of medications, keep a little card in your wallet where you write down the name(s) of current medications so that if you are in a doctor's office or an emergency room, you can provide accurate information. Also give your spouse a similar card to carry in their wallet, and teach your children the names of their medications so that if you are not around and there's a problem, they can tell someone what they are taking.

2. Are you prescribing the trade name or a generic?

Generic medications are generally cheaper, and in some situations, may do just as well as the brand names. Generic medications are allowed (by law) to vary in their potency from one another by 10%, however, and for some children, that 10% difference can mean the difference between good symptom relief and poor relief. Generics can also vary in their impurities. If you do find a generic brand that works well for your child, see if the pharmacy can give you the same generic brand each time. In other cases, a child may need the brand name of a medication to insure consistency or if there are colorings or other aspects that make the generic form unsuitable.

3. What is this medicine supposed to do that will help my child?

When a child has a number of comorbid conditions, be sure that you know exactly which symptom or problem is being targeted. For example, is the medication supposed to decrease hyperactivity, improve concentration, both, or something else?

4. What is the recommended dosage? What dose are you starting my child on?

5. How many times a day does this medication get taken?

6. At what times should it be taken?

7. Does the medication get taken with food or on an empty stomach?

If the medication schedule requires in-school dosing, be sure to inform the physician what time of day your child has lunch, and ask if it should be taken before lunch, with lunch, or after lunch.

8. Are there any foods or beverages that cannot be taken with this medication?

Some medications, like MAO inhibitors that may be used in the treatment of depression and/or anxiety, interact with foods containing tyramine, and there may be a long list of foods that should not be eaten within a certain number of hours of taking the medication. Other medications require avoiding alcohol or restricting alcohol. Parents may also want to inquire about caffeinated beverages (coffee, tea) and super-caffeinated beverages or energy drinks to ask how they might interact with any prescribed ADHD medications.

And while we're on the topic, ask if the medication can be taken if the child or teen has been drinking any alcohol or smoking any marijuana or taking any recreational drugs. Teen (or pre-teens) who may be experimenting with alcohol or drugs need to know if there's any risk. My recommendation is to have the physician meet privately with the patient to discuss this topic because some kids will not acknowledge or admit using if their parent is present.

9. If this medication works, how long will it take before we will see an effect?

Some medications, like the neuroleptics, usually have an effect within days or the first week. Other medications, like clonidine, may take months to build up in the system before you see its best therapeutic effect. By having a realistic idea as to what to expect, you may not give up too quickly or stay too long with a medication.

10. What are the possible side effects of this medication?

- a. Are any of them dangerous or life-threatening?
- b. Is this medication addictive?
- c. Does this medication have the potential for abuse like recreational drugs?
- d. Does this medication affect sexual functioning?

Women of child-bearing age who are on contraceptive pills will also need to inquire as to whether the medication will interact with the contraceptive pill or reduce its efficacy. For teens and adults, sexual side effects of certain medications may be an issue.

11. If my child doesn't feel well on the medication, how long should we give it before we call you?

Different classes of medications have different side effect profiles. Some tend to produce gastric symptoms or dry mouth, fatigue, cognitive dulling, etc. Your physician can advise you as to

whether any side effects are likely to clear up in a matter of days or are likely to persist unless the dose is changed, etc. The physician can also give you some tips for coping with side effects.

12. Is there any circumstance or side effect that you would want us to call you right away?

Because some side effects may be serious or even life-threatening, always ask what reports from your child need to trigger a call to the doctor immediately.

13. Are any tests needed to monitor before and while on this medication?

Some medications require cardiac monitoring, while others may require other types of lab tests, and some medications may require monitoring for weight gain, etc.

14. How often will you need to see my child to monitor this medication?

Some monitoring for some medications can be done by phone. At the beginning, however, most physicians will want to see your child again in a few weeks or a month after initiating medication so that they can check pulse, blood pressure, etc.

15. What happens if we miss a dose? Should I give it when we remember or just skip it?

Some medications can be taken within a particular "window," e.g., if you remember within 2 hours of the missed dose, you can take it. For other medications, the window may be much shorter or longer, so always ask what to do if a dose is missed.

16. Are there any other medications or over-the-counter products that should NOT be taken with this medication?

Many parents use a specialist like a psychiatrist or neurologist to prescribe medications for their children's conditions such as Tourette's, OCD, ADHD, or autism spectrum disorders, and use their regular pediatrician for everything else. If you have more than one professional who prescribes medications for your child, always remind the pediatrician or internist what medication(s) your child is already on and ask them to check for potential interactions. Do not assume they will remember that you mentioned to them on the phone that your child had started another medication for tics or ADHD, etc. If medications are being discussed, always review with the physician every medication your child is taking, even if it is an "over-the-counter" medication. Drugs.com provides a free [interaction checker](#) if you would like to conduct your own search. Their tool also enables you to research a particular medication or herbal and check for interactions with other medications, herbals, or foods.

17. Would you please ask the pharmacy to write the expiration date for the medication on the label?

18. Are there any activities that should be avoided while on this medication, like driving a car?

What about Vitamin Supplements and Herbals?

If someone recommends an alternative treatment or something that is not FDA-approved (such as vitamins or herbal supplements that are sold over-the-counter), do not assume that it is necessarily safe or that it can be combined with any medication.

A number of years ago, the FDA decided not to regulate the vitamins/herbals industry. Their decision does not mean that herbals do not have the potential to have adverse or even life-threatening consequences at times. It simply means that the U.S. government took a "hands off" position.

Alone or in combination with prescribed drugs, a wide variety of dietary supplements have been linked to severe illness and problems. Do not assume. Ask your physician or pharmacist about the safety of any herbal and whether it can be combined with any prescribed medication.