

Taking Medications Safely

*******Taking Medications Safely (Part 1)*******

Narrator

Medical therapies have been around for thousands of years, with the first signs of herbal medicines dating back to 15,000 B.C., in the prehistoric Lascaux cave of France. It wasn't until 400 B.C., when Hippocrates emerged to establish medicine as a science and practice.

Known as the Father of Medicine and the creator of the Hippocratic Oath, his message was simple, practice medicine safely and honorably and prescribe treatment for the good of the patient.

It wasn't until the early part of the 20th century that we entered the era of modern medicine for chronic illnesses. And today scientists have developed a medicine for nearly everything.

Raymond Woosley, MD, PhD, Critical Path Institute, Tucson, AZ

They've been able to create many new medications that have saved lives, they've extended life.

Narrator

That's the good, there's also bad. Misuse of medications can result in injury, disease and even death.

Raymond Woosley, MD, PhD, Critical Path Institute, Tucson, AZ

Many of the medications when taken together are harmful. If they interact, and one medicine interferes with the action of the other or if one medicine causes the other one to be super potent it can cause harm.

Narrator

Using medications safely is the goal, and communication between patient, doctors, nurses, and pharmacists can help ensure patients get the good out of the medications and limit the risk of the bad.

Robert Boltuch, DO, Family Practitioner

Communication is key. Without that, we're just hoping that our patients will do well.

Narrator

82 year-old Joseph Hughes is a retired building inspector from Palm Beach County Florida. An avid stamp collector since the days of FDR, Joseph enjoys looking back on good memories. But he's had some bad memories as well. Joseph had two devastating car crashes that have given him a number of different health complications. The first one happened about ten years ago.

Joseph E. Hughes, Sr., Patient

I got on Donald Ross Road to go to I 95 to go home, I was the only car going west on the road, I saw one car coming east. Next time I saw that car was in my left front fender.

Narrator

Joseph needed 4 different operations and 6 metal pins in his leg. He was hospitalized for months and was given pain medicine to help reduce his discomfort.

Joseph E. Hughes, Sr., Patient

They kept me doped up so much I was having such weird nightmares for 4 months, you couldn't believe. Plus they kept giving me the medications I was on prior to the accident.

Narrator

Doctors determined Joseph's nightmares were a side effect of the pain medication. However, taking multiple medications can create an environment for one medication to interact negatively with another medication. After Joseph mentioned his nightmares to his doctors they adjusted his medication, and Joseph became nightmare free.

After a year of being in and out of the hospital Joseph felt well enough to take a road trip to Charleston South Carolina with his wife, Raquel. It wasn't a good trip.

Joseph E. Hughes, Sr., Patient

I'm the first car stopped at a red light and a van with the driver on a cell phone hit me so hard it not only knocked me across the intersection, but he totaled my car and ruined my lower back forever.

Narrator

Joseph still has difficulty getting around because of that accident and as a result of the chronic pain and other related conditions he's on a host of different medications.

The first rule for patients, let ALL your healthcare professionals, including your dentist and eye specialist, know all about your medications. These include prescription medications, herbal supplements, dietary supplements and vitamins, and any over-the-counter medication.

Why? Because they can all interact with each other and cause serious problems.

Michele Weizer, PharmD, BSPS, JFK Medical Center, Atlantis, FL

Some of the most common drug interactions are things that patients think are not harmful. So for instance, again, drugs that are available over the counter. Just because you can buy something without talking to a pharmacist, doesn't always mean that it's safe.

Raymond Woosley, MD, PhD, Critical Path Institute, Tucson, AZ

One of the biggest problems in medicine today is the use of a very important medicine, a blood thinner called Warfarin or Coumadin. This medicine is used to prevent strokes, to prevent heart attacks, yet it interacts with, according to some authorities, over 300 different medicines. Many of the dietary supplements that people take interact with Warfarin and cause bleeding problems. It's estimated that 36 thousand people every year bleed because their blood gets too thin.

Narrator

As dangerous as drug interactions are, they are also very common.

Michele Weizer, PharmD, BSPS, JFK Medical Center, Atlantis, FL

When I look at the patient population who comes through the emergency room, anywhere from about 13-50% of the admissions have, as a component, a drug interaction or an adverse drug event from that medication therapy. And unfortunately the more number of medications a patient is on, the higher the chance the person could have an interaction to begin with.

Narrator

The most likely offenders can be medicines like: ibuprofen and aspirin, sleep medications and anti-depressants, calcium tablets and certain antibiotics. Also, certain vitamins can be dangerous when mixed in with the wrong prescription.

Another way for a drug interaction to occur is through certain foods and beverages. Consumption of green leafy vegetables, which contain vitamin K, may interfere with an array of medications. Drinking too much grapefruit juice may also interfere with certain medications.

It's important to consult with your doctor about each medicine and what can possibly prevent it from doing 'good.'

Michele Weizer, PharmD, BSPS, JFK Medical Center, Atlantis, FL

So we're very concerned about any vitamin that a patient may take, any over the counter supplementation, herbal product, even if they're visiting an acupuncturist and they're taking some Chinese herbs, all those

things actually can have some active components in them that can either, number one, interact with a medication that would require a prescription, or they can cause some side effects themselves.

Narrator

Many patients, especially the elderly, tend to see more than one doctor for a variety of conditions. Sometimes remembering what one physician prescribes vs. the other may be overwhelming.

When we come back, we'll take a look at why your pharmacist is an important part of your healthcare team.

*******Taking Medications Safely (Part 2)*******

Narrator

You're in the hospital for treatment. You have several medical professionals in and out of your room reviewing your condition and prescribing different medications.

You feel safe and confident that everything is going, as it should. But knowing that you have a competent healthcare team doesn't mean you should stay silent.

As the patient, you should always feel empowered to ask questions if you don't understand what's being prescribed for you. Also, feel comfortable asking whether any medicine could interfere with any other medication you're taking or how you might be able to tell if you have an allergy to it.

Arizona resident and retired cardiologist, Dr. Robert Moser is 86 years old. He and his wife, Linda, enjoy spending time together. Dr. Moser knows medicine, for 10 years, he was an executive with the American College of Physicians. But a few years ago, he was forced to go from being the doctor to being the patient.

Robert H. Moser, MD, Retired, Patient

From the time I was in my mid 30's I was a runner. I was running 3 miles a day, 5, 6 days a week. And then when I got to be about 50, my knees began to give me problems so I switched to a bike. And I was riding a bike 5 days a week, sometimes 6 days a week up to 18, 20 miles a day.

Narrator

One early morning, Robert started his normal bicycle routine, took the same bike path, went at normal speed. Everything was normal as usual, until...

Robert H. Moser, MD, Retired, Patient

I approached the intersection, it was an intersection I have passed through a couple hundred times over the last few years. And I had a green light and I came through the intersection and the next thing I knew I woke up in the emergency room. I never saw it. I never felt it. I didn't know anything.

Narrator

Robert had severe damage to his neck and dislocated a vertebra in his spine. Doctors worked to stabilize the vertebra with titanium screws. The operation was a success it was the recovery that almost did him in.

Robert H. Moser, MD, Retired, Patient

One day the nurse came in and she handed me a pill I had never seen before and I said "did my doctor order this" and she said "oh yes, oh yes," I said "well what is it for" and she said "well, I don't know that but he ordered it," I said "well I'm not going to take it until I know what it is and what it's for" and when I finally, she finally checked, and he had not ordered that pill and as a matter of fact I subsequently found out it was intended for another patient who was in the next room. That happened twice.

Michele Weizer, PharmD, BSPS, JFK Medical Center, Atlantis, FL

The most important thing is, if you were on a certain medication at home and we're giving it to you here and it doesn't look the same, ask the question. It doesn't mean that it's not the same medication, but we want to verify.

Narrator

Sometimes, patients feel intimidated or embarrassed. They don't feel comfortable asking the nurses or doctors questions. That's understandable but ask anyway.

Robert H. Moser, MD, Retired, Patient

I was a physician in a hospital, and yet there were times when I felt intimidated and I was hesitant to ask a nurse 'what is that pill,' but I did. And as I said, on two occasions she was trying to give me a pill that wasn't for me, it was for somebody else.

Robert Boltuch, DO, Family Practitioner

Mistakes can happen and the more information the better the communication, the better the outcome is going to be.

Narrator

One way to know your medications is to ask questions. Write your questions down and ask your doctor. Some obvious, yet important questions are:

- What's the name of the medication and why are you taking it?
- How long do I need to take it, how do I take it, and when should I take it?
- Is there a generic form of this medication?
- If I miss a dose, what should I do?
- Are there any side effects associated with the medication and what should I do if I experience any?
- How do I know if I'm allergic to it?

Michele Weizer, PharmD, BSPS, JFK Medical Center, Atlantis, FL

If you don't understand what a medication's name is, or what it's being used for, I want you to feel free to ask about that. You should feel very comfortable that the medication that you're getting makes sense. When a patient is in the hospital, they're their best advocate. No one but them knows the best about themselves. You know how you feel, you know how you should feel, so you should be able to detect the difference.

Narrator

By being aware of your situation, you can help prevent any in hospital errors. If you've been on medication before your stay, a hospital pharmacist will make sure you continue to receive those medications.

It's important that all patients list all the medications, prescription, over-the-counter, herbal, and dietary supplements, they're on.

Michele Weizer, PharmD, BSPS, JFK Medical Center, Atlantis, FL

My suggestion is a patient list, a medication list, and there's a variety of places that you can download one off the web or just a sheet of paper typed out from your computer or written down, but it should have your drug name, the actual strength that you're taking, how many times a day you take that medication, and whether you've been taking it for a long time or not.

Robert Boltuch, DO, Family Practitioner

To have a list on you is very helpful. What if you're brought to an Emergency Room and you're unable to speak, at least you'll have a list with you.

Narrator

Joseph Hughes, keeps a little hand written sheet of paper with all his medications in his pocket at all times.

Joseph E. Hughes, Sr., Patient

I have all my medications. My primary use of it is when I go to a new doctor. They want to know that. You have to fill a form out, so I don't have to rack my brain, I just take the list out and copy it.

Narrator

The pharmacist is also a valuable member of the medical team both in and out of the hospital.

Michele Weizer, PharmD, BSPS, JFK Medical Center, Atlantis, FL

A pharmacist is a great person to talk to. And sometimes it's hard for a patient to realize that it's a side effect from a medication but really just a few minutes with a pharmacist might help identify that's what the problem may be.

Narrator

For cost or convenience reasons many patients may have multiple pharmacies that provide their medications. That's not always the best way to go.

Many pharmacy chains have databases within their stores that share information with only other stores in the chain. So, if you get your medications from the same pharmacy chain, chances of a drug interaction are much lower. The computer database will identify the medications likely to interact with each other and inform the pharmacist and the patient.

If you get your medications from different pharmacies there's not necessarily a database to protect you.

Michele Weizer, PharmD, BSPS, JFK Medical Center, Atlantis, FL

Whatever pharmacy you go to, you should show them your complete list of medications as well. Just so the pharmacist can do a double check and make sure there isn't a drug interaction that's gonna occur from the new prescription that you're presenting.

Narrator

What happens with all the medication you've been prescribed while you were in the hospital? When we come back, we'll talk about the hospital discharge procedures and what you should know before you leave the hospital.

*******Taking Medications Safely (Part 3)*******

Narrator

You're getting ready to leave the hospital. What's the next step?

Michele Weizer, PharmD, BSPS, JFK Medical Center, Atlantis, FL

You should get a list, that's complete, of everything that you should be taking once you're discharged from the hospital, you should receive prescriptions for any medication that you need a prescription for, and that would obviously be any new medication that you're on.

In addition as part of your discharge instructions it should include when you should be returning to visit with the physician, any laboratory data that might be needed, certain medications need to be monitored, they might tell you in a week go have your blood drawn, here's a prescription for that.

Narrator

A checklist of things to remember, while you're in the hospital:

- Ask your medical team, doctors and nurses, questions about your care after you leave the hospital, what do you need to know?

- If a caregiver will be helping, the caregiver should get instructions from the hospital staff.
- Know your medicines. Know their names, what they do, how much to take, when to take them, how to take them and how to store them.
- Ask your doctor if these new medicines will react with other medicines.
- If possible, have your hospital prescriptions filled before you get home and get an emergency number from the doctor just in case you have questions after leaving the hospital.

When you leave the hospital you should feel knowledgeable about your condition and the treatments. If you have any doubts, or still don't understand why you've been prescribed a medication, ask your medical team to explain it again. Feel free to write notes on your medications so you can refer to them when you're at home.

When we come back, tips to remember about taking medication safely.

*****Taking Medications Safely (Part 4)*****

Narrator

Taking any medication is like signing a contract. You should know all the terms and be familiar with all the rules. Safely taking medications means that you should be taking the right medicine for the condition, at the right time of day, and in the right way. Failure to do so, may lead you back to the hospital or worse.

Raymond Woosley, MD, PhD, Critical Path Institute, Tucson, AZ

I think the most important thing that a patient can do is to recognize that these medicines, while important, while possibly lifesaving, can be very dangerous. So really be part of the healthcare team. To be aggressive, to be informed, to keep a very accurate record of what they're taking and share that with every one of their caregivers.

Narrator

Even though getting around isn't easy for Joseph Hughes, he still likes to keep going. He and his wife enjoy traveling, believe it or not, and try to fit in a cruise every now and then. Since he's been there a few times, Joseph has some advice for other patients in the hospital.

Joseph E. Hughes, Sr., Patient

You must tell them everything that you can possibly remember about the reason why you're there, because that's the only information they have. They're not mind-readers and if you don't give them the information, they don't have it, they can't help you properly.

Robert Boltuch, DO, Family Practitioner

When you see a new specialist, don't assume he's going to know every medicine you're on. Bring your whole list of medicines and carefully review them and do that with any healthcare practitioner that you might be seeing to avoid interactions.

Narrator

Here are some tips to remember about taking medication safely and being responsible for your healthcare:

- Make sure you can read your prescription. Have the doctor read it back to you.
- Use the same pharmacy to fill all prescriptions. Make sure you get the right prescription and have the pharmacist explain your medicine to you.
- Remember to take your medicine as prescribed.
- If you take several medications, putting them in a pill box, writing them on a calendar and even setting an alarm will help remind you when you need to take them.
- If you're in the hospital, ask questions and speak up if you think you're receiving the wrong medicine.
- Ask for a list of medicines you'll need to take home and how to safely take them.

Dr. Robert Moser may not ride his bike like he used to, but he still enjoys bicycle riding for exercise, only now his bike is of the indoor variety.

Robert H. Moser, MD, Retired, Patient

I routinely exercise. I have an indoor bike. I've watched every old movie that ever was made. I ride my bike for about an hour to an hour and a half a day. I walk around the pool for maybe half an hour a day. We travel quite a bit. And basically reading all the books I never had time to read when I was in practice or teaching. So life has become very tranquil.

Narrator

He too has some advice.

Robert H. Moser, MD, Retired, Patient

You simply don't take a medicine if you don't know what it is. You just don't do that. You don't have to be offensive about it, you don't have to be mean. If it's a nurse bringing it, say, 'Miss I really don't know what that is, can you please tell me what that is, and what it's for, and are you sure it's for me?'

Narrator

Communicating with you doctors and nurses, and knowing about your treatment can help make that treatment successful, and may help even prevent medication errors and their potential long-term consequences.