

# medication interactions

Prescription for Disaster

by Lynn Machon



**Creating a basic medication list is easy.**

You can download a form at [safemedication.com](http://safemedication.com) or simply write the list on an index card. The information should include:

- **All medications**, herbs and supplements being taken
- **Dosage/strength** of each
- **Frequency** (when you take them)
- **Reason for taking** (your medical condition)

**H**ere's a simple question for you: If you were brought into the local emergency room today, would the doctors and nurses on staff have access to the information they need to save your life?

If you carry a card in your wallet with a list of your medical history and current medications, they would. Without it, experts say, you risk misdiagnosis and potential drug interactions that could prove harmful to your health.

Drug interactions, which result from mixing different medications, are a serious problem. Unintended drug combinations can decrease the potency of certain prescriptions, rendering them ineffective. Alternately, in some cases, interactions can increase a medication's efficiency to the point of toxicity.

Side effects from drug interactions range from headaches and nausea, in moderate cases, to ir-

regular heartbeat, liver damage and even death in serious instances.

But dangerous drug mixes are not limited to prescription medications alone. Interactions can, and often do, occur with over-the-counter pain relievers and antihistamines, vitamins and supplements, as well.

According to Mark Pinski, clinical pharmacist with Marshall Medical Center in Placerville, "people generally think that if it's not a prescription medication, you don't have to worry about [interactions]. But your body can't tell the difference between prescription medications and herbal remedies. They can all potentially adversely interact."

To avoid potential drug interactions, he says, doctors and pharmacists routinely coordinate together to track patient medications. However, patients commonly receive prescriptions from more

than one doctor and have their medications filled at more than one pharmacy, making effective tracking difficult at best.

Complicating things further, Pinski suggests, it's the increased use of mail-order medications, which prevents that crucial interface between pharmacist and patient. "When the pharmacist reviews the patient's medication regimen, they don't have all the information." The result is literally a prescription for disaster.

Ultimately, it's our responsibility as educated patients to be aware of the interaction potential of any medications we are taking, and actually carry a current list of those medications at all times.

In an emergency situation such as an automobile accident or a heart attack, this medication list becomes even more vital, says Robin Nagel, an emergency room nurse at Kaiser Permanente in Roseville.

"We see examples of this in the emergency room all the time," she says. "Patients arrive here and when asked what medications they are on, will say 'two pink pills, a blue pill and a yellow pill,' which doesn't give us the information we vitally need." More frightening, she says, are those patients who, because of their injuries or medical condition, are unable to respond at all.

In both cases, Nagel says, without a medical history or medication list, emergency room doctors and nurses have to start from "ground zero" in gathering information. As a result, precious time that could be better spent treating the patient is wasted.

The key, experts say, is to keep the list with you at all times, preferably in your wallet where first responders look in emergency situations. It is also recommended to keep a copy at home, as well as give one to your spouse, another family member or a close neighbor.

Along with your medication list, it's important to include your primary care physician's name and phone number, a brief medical history (especially in conditions such as diabetes or prior cardiac arrest) and a list of known allergies (better yet, wear an allergy bracelet too).

The truth is, you never know when an emergency will arise. By taking the time to write down your medication list and medical history and place it in your wallet, you might help save your own life someday. ●