When you are discharged from the hospital, the flurry of activity and instructions can be overwhelming and confusing for recovering patients and their families. It’s also the point where medical errors are more likely to happen, according to patient safety experts. And some of the most common mistakes involve medications.

In a recent study in the Annals of Internal Medicine, half of patients experienced one or more medication errors during the first month after discharge from the hospital—23 percent were serious; 2 percent, life threatening.

Hospitals that follow-up with discharged patients often find that people still have a lot of questions about their medication, according to Katherine Gleason, M.P.H., R.Ph, clinical quality leader at Northwestern Memorial Hospital and researcher in medication safety. “All those drug names and doses can be really complex. It’s hard to keep everything straight, especially if you’ve been sick,” says Gleason.

Following the steps outlined on the next page can help simplify the task of keeping track of medications as well as reduce the risk of an error that could result in being readmitted to the hospital. We’ve even included a checklist so that you can keep key information in one spot for easy reference.

1. Review your medications.

Before you leave the hospital, make sure that a healthcare provider goes through your medication list with you, explaining what each drug is for and how to take it, as well as possible side effects. Ask a friend or loved one to be there as well. “It’s so important to have another set of eyes and ears,” says Helga Brake, PharmD, a pharmacist at Northwestern Memorial Hospital with advanced training in patient safety. “It’s almost impossible for one person to take in all that information.”

In fact, the majority of people don’t understand basic information about their medications after they return home according to a recent study of nearly 400 discharged patients. “We are not doing a very good job of educating the patient,” says study author, Leora Horwitz, M.D., M.H.S., assistant professor of internal medicine at Yale University School of Medicine and a researcher in patient safety.

Because the medication list provided by the hospital can be hard to understand, Horwitz advises patients or their caregivers to create their own using a template such as the one included in this brochure. “Writing it down reinforces the information and brings up questions and areas of confusion,” says Horwitz. Also ask if some medications are only to be taken “as needed”—pain medications, for example—or can be stopped after you feel better.
2. **Ask about medications that you were taking before your hospital stay.**
   When you review your medication list, ask if the drugs you were taking prior to hospitalization have been changed or stopped. Remember to ask about everything you take, including over-the-counter drugs, vitamins, minerals, herbals, and dietary supplements—any of those can possibly interact with your new medications.

   About one-quarter of the time, when hospital doctors change an established medication, they make an error, according to the same Yale study that uncovered a gap in patient understanding. The vast majority of errors happen with drugs that are unrelated to the reason for the hospital stay—a doctor may accidentally cancel an asthma medication in a knee-surgery patient, for example.

   While those mistakes can seem minor, they may have serious consequences according to Horwitz. “Most of the time when patients are readmitted to the hospital, it’s for something different. Making sure all medications are correct can reduce those complications.”

3. **Bring up cost.**
   If price is a concern, ask your doctor if there is another medication or generic version that costs less and will work as well.

4. **Make sure you can read any new prescriptions.**
   If you can’t, a pharmacist might not be able to either. So ask the doctor for a legible one, and make sure it includes the drug’s brand and generic names, directions for use, and what the medication is being prescribed for directly on the prescription. “Most doctors don’t mind being asked; patient safety is important to them, too,” says Gleason.

5. **Fill your prescriptions promptly.**
   It’s critically important to start some medications right away. For example, one study found that patients discharged after a heart procedure who didn’t fill their prescription for a blood thinner within 24 hours doubled their risk of heart attack or death.

   Using a single pharmacy for all your prescriptions also provides an important safety net. The pharmacist will check for possible dangerous drug interactions and duplicate medications. He or she is also an excellent resource to answer questions about both prescription and over-the-counter drugs.

   Always check your prescriptions before you leave the pharmacy. Does the prescription label look different than what you expected? Does a refill have a different shape, color, or size than what you were given before? If so, ask the pharmacist to double-check it right away. Also, read and save the patient information that comes with your medication.

6. **Review your drugs with your primary care physician.**
   Don’t assume your primary care doctor received an updated list of your new medications from the hospital. Especially if hospital doctors changed an existing medication or added something new, call your primary care doctor to go over the new list. If the dosing schedule is too complicated or there is any other reason that you are having trouble taking your medications as prescribed, talk to your doctor about ways to simplify your drug regimen.

7. **Keep an up-to-date drug list.**
   Everyone should have a current medication list that includes prescription and over-the-counter drugs, as well as vitamins, minerals, herbals, and other dietary supplements. Don’t forget to include things like eye drops and ointments that you use regularly. Keep a copy of your current list in your wallet or purse and give one to a family member, helper, or caregiver. Remember to update the list anytime a medication changes.
1. **Do you understand what each of your medications is for and how to take it?**

   Note any questions:

   ____________________________
   ____________________________
   ____________________________
   ____________________________
   ____________________________

2. **Have any of the medications that you were taking before your hospital stay been stopped or changed? If so, ask why.**

   Note any questions:

   ____________________________
   ____________________________
   ____________________________
   ____________________________
   ____________________________

3. **What are the possible side effects of your medications?**

   Note side effects, especially anything that should be reported immediately to your doctor:

   ____________________________
   ____________________________
   ____________________________
   ____________________________
   ____________________________

4. **Do any medications require further tests or follow-up?**

   Note instructions:

   ____________________________
   ____________________________
   ____________________________
   ____________________________
   ____________________________

5. **What pharmacy will you use to fill your prescriptions?**

   Pharmacy name: ____________________________
   Telephone number: ____________________________

   Pharmacy address: ____________________________

6. **Who can you call for questions?**

   Name: ____________________________
   Telephone number: ____________________________
### How to fill out this chart:
For each prescription and over-the-counter drug as well as vitamins, minerals, herbals, and dietary supplements, include the following information.

- Full name of each drug, including any letters that appear after the name (XR, CD, etc.)
- The strength of each medicine (mg, mcg, units, etc.)
- How much you take for each dose (1 tablet, 2 capsules, etc.)
- How you take it (by mouth, inhaler, injection, patch, etc.)
- When you take it (daily in the morning and evening, monthly, etc.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ex.</th>
<th>Drug name</th>
<th>What it does</th>
<th>Dose</th>
<th>How to take it</th>
<th>When to take it</th>
<th>Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ex.</td>
<td>Generic Name: <strong>Atorvastatin</strong>&lt;br&gt;Brand Name: <strong>Lipitor</strong></td>
<td>Treats high cholesterol</td>
<td>10 mg (1 tablet)</td>
<td>By mouth</td>
<td>One tablet, daily in the morning</td>
<td>Do not drink grapefruit juice while taking this medication.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

---

**Drug #1**

- Generic Name: 
- Brand Name: 

**Drug #2**

- Generic Name: 
- Brand Name: 

**Drug #3**

- Generic Name: 
- Brand Name: 

**Drug #4**

- Generic Name: 
- Brand Name: 

**Drug #5**

- Generic Name: 
- Brand Name: 

**Drug #6**

- Generic Name: 
- Brand Name: 

---