

Over the Counter: Avoiding Errors at the Pharmacy

By Ariana Remmel | August 30, 2018

Pharmacists are among the most accessible health care providers within the medical community. Patients go to them for recommendations on over-the-counter medications, health supplements and, of course, prescription drugs. According to a study in the *Journal of Clinical Pharmacology* [↗](#), however, dispensing errors at the pharmacy may account for approximately 21 percent of medication errors that affect patients. These errors may be more common than most patients realize, but there are many stop guards in place to protect patients from harm.



“Pharmacists are the last line of defense and we catch a lot of the mistakes and errors that could

have harmful effects,” says Eduardo Fricovsky, PharmD, associate clinical professor at Skaggs School of Pharmacy and Pharmaceutical Sciences at UC San Diego. “There are a lot of systems in place to prevent these errors before they reach the patient and pharmacists are specifically trained to protect patients from medication errors.”

Special software plays a big role in preventing errors in the pharmacy. In addition, all medications are verified manually by a pharmacist before they go out to the patient. Pharmacists organize

medications to help prevent the wrong drugs from being dispensed to a patient. Look-alike and sound-alike medications are stored on different shelves to avoid confusion. What's more, the pharmacist must verify that the medication dispensed matches an image of the medication in the pharmacy database to be certain that the wrong medication is not given to a patient.

While the pharmacy is organized to prevent and catch most of these errors, there are a few things that patients can do to make sure they get the right medications:

- **Make sure your information is up to date.** One of the first things a pharmacist will ask when a patient picks up a prescription is to verify name, date of birth and address. By making sure this information is correct, the pharmacist can prevent the wrong patient from picking up a medication, especially if patients have similar names.
- **Make sure the pharmacy is aware of your allergies.** The software that pharmacists use to manage patient prescriptions is designed to catch any medications that may cause an allergic reaction in the patient. If an allergic reaction is predicted, the pharmacist can call the prescribing physician to seek out alternatives for the patient.
- **Make sure the pharmacy knows about all of the other medications you are taking, and if you have other health conditions.** The pharmacy software is designed to cross reference all medications a patient may be taking to assure that there are no drug interactions that could cause the patient harm. The system will also identify if there are contraindications or side effects that would affect the patient. If you tell your pharmacist about all of your over-the-counter and prescription medications, as well as medical history, you can help prevent potentially dangerous side effects.
- **Be sure to ask the pharmacist if you have any questions.** Pharmacists are always available for a face-to-face conversation if you are taking a new medication or have questions about an existing prescription.
- **Ask for a translator, if you need one.** Language barriers can contribute to medication errors, including misunderstandings about how medications should be administered, how much and how often. Most pharmacies will have a translator or translation service available for common regional languages.

"Your time at the pharmacy is an excellent opportunity to learn from the extensive knowledge of the pharmacist about your medications and possible side effects," Fricovsky says.

A trip to the pharmacy should be routine and painless for patients seeking medical treatment. Following these simple steps will help assure that patients receive the correct medications. If you believe that there was an error in filling a prescription, be sure to ask for a face-to-face with your pharmacist, who will be more than happy to help.

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