What are medication errors?

In Chapter 9, we discuss why medications have adverse effects. Most of these are unavoidable; their occurrence is the unfortunate price we have to pay for getting the beneficial effects of medications. One other type of harm, referred to as medication errors, are caused by human errors in prescribing or dispensing a medication. They are surprisingly common and costly to patients and to society. It has been estimated that at least 1.5 million of these preventable medication errors occur in the U.S. each year.

Why do these errors occur?
The current system for providing an intended prescribed medication is not perfect. Physicians make mistakes, which could cause a pharmacist to dispense the wrong medication or the wrong dose. Mix-ups can be caused by medications having names that look or sound very similar. Your physician’s handwriting also may be difficult to decipher. As a result, medications dispensed by the pharmacy may be wrong. Consequently, you do not get the benefits of the intended medication and, worse, you may suffer unnecessary adverse drug reactions. Of primary concern are situations in which you get a potent medication in an excessive dose or a medication with many known serious safety problems.

What is being done about it?
There is more awareness of medication error consequences, and steps are being taken to reduce their occurrence. One very promising solution is the introduction of electronic prescriptions, which offers multiple advantages. These programs could avoid the handwriting problem, can alert doctors about potential drug interactions (see Chapter 32), could avoid deviations of the prescribed dose from normal dose ranges, determine whether the medication is covered by your insurance, and come up with even lower cost treatment alternatives. It is a national goal in the U.S. to have all prescribers and pharmacists using electronic prescriptions by 2010 which is unlikely to be achieved.

In hospitals and long-term facilities, where medication errors are common, increased attention is given to monitoring and correcting the problems. Staff members are encouraged to communicate more with patients, to better educate them about their medications, and to give them and their
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families a more active role in the process of making sure that the dispensed medications are correct.

*What can you do?*

There are several steps you could take to avoid medication errors. First, maintain a list of all prescriptions, non-prescription medications, and other products -- such as vitamins and other “natural” products -- you are taking. Second, bring this list when you visit your physician so he or she can review it. Third, have your physician write down the names of new drugs (both brand and generic) prescribed to you, what they are for, their dosage, and how often to take them. Fourth, make sure the names of the drugs and directions for use received at the pharmacy match what your physician wrote down. Fifth, know that you have the right to counseling by the pharmacist if you have any questions.

Before any hospitalization or nursing home care, talk with family members or trusted friends and ask one of them to be your advocate if you need institutional care. Your advocate can speak with your doctor and find out what medications you are being prescribed. The next step for your advocate is to check with the nurse to ensure you are receiving the medication your doctor ordered.

**Key messages**

 ✓ Medication errors are preventable problems that occur when prescribing and dispensing medications.
 ✓ The consequences of these errors are the lack of the intended medication’s benefits and risks of adverse effects.
 ✓ One of the major steps taken to reduce errors is the introduction of electronic prescribing.
 ✓ You can avoid medication errors by being fully informed and having a written record of all your medications.
 ✓ An advocate can help you avoid medication errors if you must be hospitalized or require nursing home care.