

Medicines –

Am I taking too many pills?

Medicines can help to prevent, alleviate and heal diseases. If you have several conditions, you probably take a lot of pills. The problem: The more medicines you take, the more likely you are to experience side effects. In medical jargon the term for the parallel taking of several medicines are *multi-medication* or *polypharmacy*.

This information leaflet explains why people are often prescribed different medicines and looks at the associated risks. You can play an active role in only taking the medicines you really need.



What leads to multi-medication?

There are several reasons for taking different medicines at the same time. Here are some examples:

- You have several conditions that have to be treated on a permanent basis with medication. Older people, in particular, often take too many medicines.
- Different doctors are involved in your treatment. They don't always know what you have been prescribed, particularly if an overview of your medicines, a so-called medication plan, is missing.
- You have side-effects which are not recognised as such. Instead of discontinuing the responsible medicine or lowering the dose, you are prescribed another medicine to alleviate the side-effects.
- If you suddenly develop symptoms or become ill, you are prescribed additional medicines. Once you have recovered, they are not discontinued.
- Over the course of time, new medicines have been added but you are still taking the "old" ones.
- Unsuccessful medication-based treatments are not halted.
- You were in hospital and you were prescribed new medicines during your admission that are not compatible with your customary medicines. After your discharge, no review of your medicines is undertaken.
- Your habits and symptoms have changed, for instance you have lost weight in recent weeks. But no modifications are made to your medicines.
- You take medicines you bought yourself. Your doctor doesn't know about this.
- Perhaps you think you should always be prescribed medication, for instance when you have a cold. However, many complaints disappear with time or don't require the taking of medication. You may actually end up taking a medicine you don't need.

What are the consequences of multi-medication?

Taking medicines exactly as prescribed is important for safe, successful treatment. But often that's not so easy. Particularly if you are on multiple medicines, you may quickly lose track of the right medication, the right dose and the right time. Taking too many medicines can, therefore, lead to you not taking them correctly.

Each additional medicine increases the risk of so-called adverse drug reactions (ADRs). In most cases, they manifest as general symptoms such as fatigue, loss of appetite, dizziness, nausea, confusion or drowsiness. Falls and serious injuries may be the consequence. If you are on anticoagulants, you may experience spontaneous, prolonged bleeding. Some patients have to be hospitalised because of the side-effects.

Overall, it can be said that the more medicines you take, the more difficult it will be to predict which interactions or adverse drug reactions are likely to occur.

At a glance



- Multi-medication means the parallel taking of different medicines.
- Different medicines can influence each other and trigger more side-effects. You may experience nausea, constipation, headaches or drowsiness. Treatment in hospital is another possible consequence of multi-medication.
- There are several ways to reduce the number of medicines to be taken and the associated risks. It may be helpful, for instance, to have a medication plan listing all your medicines.
- There is no need to treat every symptom or every illness with medication. In many instances, people recover without doing anything in particular. It's often good to adopt a wait-and-see attitude.
- It's particularly important to talk to your doctor. They should know which medicines you are on. Together, you can decide which ones you need and which ones you don't.

What you yourself can do

It is not always possible to avoid taking multiple medicines. But some of them may be unnecessary. The following tips can help you, together with your doctor, tailor your medication-based treatment to your needs:

- Pill boxes can help you organise your tablets on a daily or weekly basis.
- If you still experience symptoms or pain despite taking your medicines, tell your doctor.
- If you are on several medicines, it is advisable to have all your prescriptions filled at the same pharmacy. The pharmacy staff can advise you and help you keep track.
- There should be one main contact for all questions to do with your medicines. This could be your general practitioner. They should know exactly which medicines you are taking and which ones you shouldn't take at all or take differently despite having a prescription.
- Ask your doctor for a so-called medication plan. It should list all your prescribed medicines. It will also contain details of the names of the active ingredients and the dosages. In addition, it will explain how and why you should take your medicines. If you don't have a GP surgery, a medical specialist can fill in your medication plan for you.
- Your medication plan should also list any medicines you purchased yourself. Ask the pharmacy staff to add any over-the-counter items (OTCs) you paid for yourself to your medication plan. This doesn't just mean pills but also, for instance, sprays, drops or ointments. Herbal remedies, vitamins and the like should also be included.
- Always keep this medication plan on you or take a photo of it on your smartphone. Present your medication plan each time you visit your doctor, a pharmacy or a hospital.
- Ask your doctor whether you still need to take all your medicines. Studies have shown: The fewer pills you are on, the more regularly you are likely to take them.
- Are you on more than four medicines or do you have at least three chronic disorders? Then have a doctor review your medicines at least once a year: Do you need them all? For this, bring all your medicines, including OTCs and the package inserts to your appointment.
- In order to review your medicines and select the right ones, your doctor needs to know some things about you, for instance any pre-existing conditions or new symptoms.

Furthermore, it is important for your doctor to be aware of your life circumstances and lifestyle. Share any concerns you may have about a particular medicine. You should also discuss what you want to achieve with your treatment, for example less pain or maintaining your independence. This is helpful when determining which symptoms or conditions need to be treated the most urgently.

- During your medical appointment or trip to the pharmacy, have the doctor or pharmacy staff explain how to take your medicines correctly, for instance before or after meals.
- Not every health disorder or illness has to be treated with medication. Often, symptoms disappear on their own or can be alleviated in a different way. Ask your doctor whether you should simply wait and see or whether perhaps physical exercise or another form of action could help.
- If you are having problems with a medicine or the treatment is causing symptoms, you should inform your doctor.
- Discontinuing certain medicines can trigger symptoms. Talk to your doctor about this. Please note: Don't stop taking any medicines without consulting your doctor. Don't alter the dose yourself either.

More information



I. Sources, methodology and links

This information is based on the Medical Guideline "Multi-medication ([Association of the Scientific Medical Societies] AWMF reg. no. 053-043)".

Methodology and sources:

→ www.patienten-information.de/kurzinformationen/multi-medikation#methodik

Additional short information on health topics:

→ www.patienten-information.de

II. Contact to self-help groups

You can find out from NAKOS (national contact and information office for the encouragement and support of self-help groups) where there is a self-help group in your area:

→ www.nakos.de, Tel.: 030 31018960



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