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BE WISE WITH MEDICINES  
*...the facts*

# BE WISE WITH MEDICINES

*...the facts*

IN THIS BROCHURE

YOUR HEALTH CARE TEAM

UNDERSTANDING MEDICINES

MANAGING YOUR MEDICINES

MEDICAL RECORD CARD

CHEAPER MEDICINES

*...and much more!*



MARCH 2000

  
...and be wise with medicines

# contents

*Be Wise with Medicines...the facts* was produced by the Pharmaceutical Benefits Branch of the Department of Health and Aged Care as part of the Be Wise With Medicines Campaign.

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Design: Green Words & Images, Canberra  
Cover photography: Michael Jensen

#### *Disclaimer*

We recommend that you seek advice from your doctor or pharmacist before acting on any information contained in this brochure. Do not use the information as a substitute for talking about your medical problems with a health professional.

Publications Production Unit (Public Affairs,  
Parliamentary and Access Branch) Commonwealth  
Department of Health and Aged Care  
ISBN 0 642 415552  
Publications Approval number 2639

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**Welcome** to the first issue of *Be wise with medicines...the facts*. This brochure aims to provide you with an overview of the different types of medicines available and how to use them wisely. This is very important as about 80,000 people are admitted to hospital each year as the result of problems with the use of medicines, including adverse reactions to medications. There are also tips on how to develop good communication with your health care team, how to make your lifestyle healthier and how to save money when buying prescription medicine.

We hope this information is of value to you. **Keep this brochure handy for future reference.**

The Department of Health and Aged Care is developing a magazine about the wise use of medicines to provide regular updates on topics such as brand substitution, immunisation, antibiotics, diabetes, medicine and your child, arthritis and much more. The magazine will also help to keep you abreast of any significant changes in medicine.



  
...and be wise with medicines

welcome

# Your health care team

A doctor explains to Michael and his children that it's important to know as much as possible about the roles of your different health care professionals.



*having an established doctor-patient relationship is valuable...*

**Y**ou are the most important person in your health care team. To keep the team working, you need to know about the roles of your doctor, pharmacist and other health professionals (nurse, dentist, physiotherapist and so on).

Medicines are a part of every day life. As we get older the need for medicines often increases. Understanding your medical conditions and the medicines you take to manage these conditions is important. For parents, the responsibility is often two-fold – looking after your own health and that of your family as well.

Being an active player in your health care team, understanding each person's role, where to get help, what questions to ask, and the important role you play in that team will help you make more informed decisions about your health, your medicines and your lifestyle.

## YOUR DOCTOR

Your doctor plays an important role in your health care.

Some people may choose to visit more than one doctor. This means you and your family's health records can be scattered, with limited coordination of treatment and sometimes no confirmation that a treatment was successful or that a medicine had an adverse effect. Having an established doctor-patient relationship is valuable, particularly if you have a complex problem or chronic health condition.

## YOUR PHARMACIST

Your pharmacist can help you understand your medicines and how to get the best from them. He or she can advise you on the right medicines for minor health problems and can tell you when you should see your doctor if the condition



doesn't improve. Most importantly, your pharmacist is available to talk about managing your medicine as well as giving information and advice on keeping healthy. For example, pharmacists will work with you and your doctor to ensure you get the best from your medicines.

### YOUR NURSE

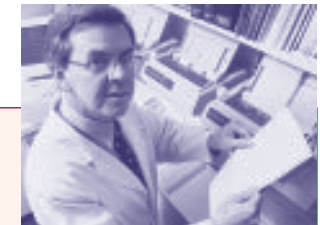
There may be times when you discuss your health and medicines with a nurse.

Talk to a nurse if you are unclear about something your doctor or pharmacist has said, or you've forgotten what they said. Nurses can reinforce your doctor or pharmacist's message, or encourage you to go back to them to find out more. If you are concerned about how to fit taking your medicine into your daily routine, nurses can give you useful suggestions.



**Pictured left**  
Talk to a nurse if you are unclear about something your doctor or pharmacist has said, or you've forgotten what they said. Nurse Kellie gives Cynthia some medicine.

Nurse Jill explains to hospital patient EIs that people who are prescribed a medicine in hospital should check with a General Practitioner or pharmacist that it is compatible with other medicines they are taking.



## Special pharmacy services

Some pharmacies offer special services as well as dispensing prescriptions. Kevin is a pharmacist with a large number of customers who come to him for advice on their general health needs. However it is often the case that when they are most in need of advice (when they are sick or recuperating), Kevin's customers are least able to get to his shop. So Kevin and his staff now offer home visits as part of their customer services. For example, they will visit the home of a patient who has recently come out of hospital to ensure that the medicines the patient was prescribed in hospital are compatible with any others they are taking. Kevin and his staff can also suggest mobility aids or dosage aids that might assist the customer in their recovery. 'It's all part of the service!' says Kevin. ♦



You

## You

Communicating effectively with your doctor, pharmacist or nurse is important if you are to make informed decisions about your health. It is your right to ask questions and to be given enough information so that you can take your medicines wisely. Never be afraid to ask. Getting the right information can be as simple as asking the right questions. You should ask whether there is some written information (for example, Consumer Medicine Information) that you can have. This will make it easier for you to remember what you need to know. If you don't understand something, ask for it to be explained in simpler terms. If you need an interpreter, just ask.

## You are the most important member of the team

Geoff is the most important member of his health care team. Of course his doctor and pharmacist play a vital role, but it is Geoff's responsibility to look after his body and to seek help when something seems wrong. During his 30-year career as a pilot, Geoff had health checks every six months. Now that he has retired, he's continuing this good habit with annual check-ups. Geoff's attentiveness to his health needs has resulted in him feeling 'fighting fit' and looking forward to many healthy years of retirement. ♦

## *Some questions you could ask about your medicine include:*

- What is the diagnosis? How long is it likely to last?
- What can I do to help myself get better?
- What is the name of the new medicine you have prescribed for me?
- What does the medicine do and how should I use it?
- How long should I use it?
- Are any side effects likely or should I expect to feel any different while taking this medicine?
- When should the medicine be reviewed or stopped?
- How and when is the best way to use this medicine?
- What food, drink, activity or storage might affect how well this medicine works?
- What can I do to reduce the chance of any side effects?
- What should I do if I miss a dose?
- Can you give me any information about this medicine?
- Using medicines is a problem for me because of my sight/swallowing/strength/memory. How can you help me?
- Please fill in/check my MediList & Health Record card. Will this medicine interact with other medicines I use?

## Andrew's answer to good health

Andrew is a doctor who thinks physical health is inseparable from mental, emotional and spiritual wellbeing. But as well as his patients having a healthy attitude, Andrew believes that the relationship between doctors and consumers is critical in the provision of health care. 'Patients have to feel confident enough with their doctor to be able to ask questions about their treatment or the medicines they have been prescribed without feeling foolish or judged. People should be encouraged to take responsibility for their medicines and health by feeling comfortable enough to ask about anything they are unsure of.'



Andrew and Katrina have adopted a partnership approach towards the management of her medicines and her general health.

If you mix your medicines without making sure your doctor or pharmacist knows you may not receive the full benefit from your medicine or could suffer an adverse reaction. At worst you could be hospitalised. Sadly, some people even die.

About 80,000 people are admitted to hospital each year as a result of problems with the use of medicines, including adverse reactions. Don't let this happen to you. Make sure you use your medicine safely. The information in this brochure shows you how.

### WHAT IS MEDICINE?

Medicine is defined as anything that has a proven therapeutic value. Medicines include prescription and non-prescription drugs from synthetic and biological sources. Herbal products, vitamin and mineral supplements and homeopathic products are now known as 'complementary medicines'.

### PRESCRIPTION MEDICINES

Prescription medicines are those that are prescribed by doctors. After assessing a person's symptoms and signs the doctor decides which medicine is the most appropriate for treatment and will then write a prescription for that medicine. Prescriptions are written using either a prescription pad or a print-out from a computer. Once the doctor has written the prescription the patient has to go to a pharmacy to get it filled.

# Are you using *your* medicine safely?



The use of complementary medicines in Australia and throughout the world is increasing but, as with all other medicines, it is important that they be used wisely. You should always tell your doctor or pharmacist about any complementary medicine you are taking to make sure there are no adverse reactions.

### PHARMACY MEDICINES

Pharmacists fill prescriptions for medicines that have been written by doctors. While doctors are still the primary point of diagnosis and treatment, pharmacists work closely with patients to ensure they understand their doctors' intentions and how their medicines will work. Pharmacists also offer advice on over-the-counter medicines.

### OVER-THE-COUNTER MEDICINES

The first step many of us take when we feel sick is to go to a pharmacy or supermarket for some non-prescription medicine. Many problems will of course get better with time or a few simple

remedies. Over-the-counter medicines can be very effective – they are cheap and easier to buy than prescription medicines. They are used widely to treat common colds, pain, sinusitis, allergies and minor eye and ear problems.

Over-the-counter medicines have detailed labelling to help you make a choice about which medicine to use. However, as with all drugs, over-the-counter medicines should be used with caution. Although they may relieve your symptoms, they may not cure your problem. They may also react with other medicines you are taking. So talk to your doctor or pharmacist about all the medicines you use and follow the instructions on the label.

### COMPLEMENTARY MEDICINES

Complementary medicines (also known as 'traditional' or 'alternative' medicines) include vitamin, mineral, herbal, aromatherapy and homoeopathic products.

People use complementary medicines to prevent illnesses such as colds, to manage pain, relieve stress, relieve chronic conditions and for a range of other psychological and physical disorders. The use of complementary medicines in Australia and throughout

the world is on the increase. It is currently estimated that over 60 per cent of Australians use complementary medicines at least once a year.

The majority of complementary medicines are self-selected by consumers and used for self-treatment. Although they are generally viewed as 'low risk' products, some people may be sensitive to certain ingredients in them and should use reasonable care when taking them. Make sure you know what the medicine you are taking is intended for, follow all instructions (including dosage and warning statements) and seek appropriate, professional advice. Tell your doctor and pharmacist of any complementary medicines you are taking, as they may interact with your other medicines. If you believe that you are experiencing an adverse reaction to a complementary medicine, stop taking it, and report the problem to your health care professional. ♦



## Taking care with over-the-counter medicine

Debbie and Jim sometimes buy non-prescription medicines when either they or their two boys, Luke and Ashley, are feeling a bit sick. Debbie and Jim know that these medicines can be useful for relieving symptoms (such as a sore throat or a cold) but may not cure the problem. They are well aware that such 'over-the-counter' medicines – whether they are bought at a pharmacy or another retail outlet – may react with other medicines. So, to keep their family safe, Debbie and Jim talk to their doctor or pharmacist about *all* the medicines they use. ♦

Make sure your doctor and pharmacist know about all the medicines you are taking regardless of whether you bought them in a pharmacy, supermarket, health food store or other shop.



## MEDILIST & HEALTH RECORD CARD

Your MediList and Health Record is a place to store useful information about your health. Use it to record your doctor's and pharmacist's address; your recent test results (such as blood pressure or cholesterol); or the date of your next visit to the doctor. The MediList can also help you manage your medicines. Ask your pharmacist and doctor to write down all the medicines you use regularly, and when and how you should take them. Or, fill it out yourself. The card also has a number of useful questions you could ask your doctor or pharmacist about medicines.

If your MediList & Health Record card is missing please call Freecall 1800 020 613 for information on how to obtain another.

## Dosage aids

At 77 years of age Jean, like many older people, takes several different kinds of medicine each day. She takes some in the morning and some at night; some before food, some after. She takes one tablet per dose of some medicines, and two per dose of others. It all adds up to a very confusing regimen! To help her manage her medicines safely, Jean's pharmacist suggested she use a dosage aid. So Jean now has a special pill box that holds a week's supply of medicine. The pill box has made life a bit easier for Jean. She says, 'I know exactly what pill I am meant to take on what day. I also know if I have to take it with food or not'. By managing her medicines in this way, Jean's chance of having an adverse drug reaction is significantly reduced. ♦



Jean uses a pillbox to keep track of the medicines she takes.

# suggestions

## RECORD YOUR MEDICINES

It is important that you have a list of all of your medicines so that you, your family and your health care professionals always know what medicines you are taking. This list will remind you about what each medicine is for, how much to take, when to take them and what medicines should not be taken with them.

There is a MediList & Health Record card included with this brochure. Ask your doctor or pharmacist to complete this for you, or fill it out yourself. The record should be updated every time your medicine or dosage is changed.

## PLAY IT SAFE AND ASK

Sometimes you may experience an unexpected reaction to a medicine, such as dizziness or a rash. Make a note of your symptoms and talk to your doctor, pharmacist or nurse about them.

## USE DOSAGE AIDS

Taking several medicines at different times of the day can be very confusing. It can be difficult to remember when to take your medicine, or indeed whether you have already taken it! Talk to your

# to help you safely manage your medicines

pharmacist or nurse about memory or dosage aids that are available to make this easier.

## HAVE YOUR MEDICINES CHECKED

If you are taking a lot of medicines for extended periods of time, ask your doctor or pharmacist to check them at least once a year. Tell them or show them everything you are taking, including any medicines prescribed by a specialist, non-prescription and complimentary medicines. Remember to include all medicines you have bought from

pharmacies, supermarkets, health food stores or other sources.

Your doctor can advise you about whether your medicine is still the best treatment for your condition, whether other treatments may be better (such as a different medicine or a change in lifestyle) or whether the dosage of your medicine should be adjusted.

Your pharmacist can advise you about possible side effects and check if any of your medicines are out-of-date. Your pharmacist can also explain how and when to take your medicines and advise whether there is any risk of an unexpected reaction if certain medicines are taken together.

Your nurse can advise you about how to use medicines wisely and, if necessary, can help to make an appointment with your pharmacist or doctor.

Remember that while health professionals are there to help, you are responsible for your own health. A healthier lifestyle can often be the best medicine. ♦



## Hints for taking your medicines

- ◆ Take your medicines at the right time. Some medicines work best when taken on an empty stomach, while others should be taken with food. Ask your pharmacist.
- ◆ Follow the instructions. Make sure you know of any precautions you need to take, such as not drinking alcohol or not driving.
- ◆ Ask about possible side effects. All medicines can have side effects. Sometimes they are serious, most of the time they are not. You may need medical treatment if you get some side effects. Ask your doctor or pharmacist to answer any questions you have.
- ◆ If the treatment doesn't seem to be working, go back to your doctor. Don't stop taking the medicine without speaking to a doctor. There could be a number of reasons why the medicine isn't working.
- ◆ Be careful if taking other medicines. Always check with your doctor or pharmacist about how a new medicine will react with other medicines you are taking, regardless of whether they are prescribed by a doctor or bought over the counter from a pharmacy, supermarket or health food shop.
- ◆ Don't take any medicines not prescribed for you, and don't share your medicines with somebody else. Different medicines may affect different people in different ways, and may be ineffective or harmful if they are taken by a person they were not prescribed for.
- ◆ Don't use out-of-date medicines. Medicines which have passed their use-by date may have no effect at all, and could in fact be harmful. Take out-of-date medicines to your pharmacist for safe disposal.
- ◆ Don't always expect a prescription for antibiotics. Antibiotics only work against bacterial infections. The common cold and the flu are caused by viral infections, so antibiotics may not be necessary.
- ◆ If you are prescribed antibiotics, always finish the course. Even if you are feeling better, the infection may return and be more difficult to beat if you don't finish the course. ◆



Kevin encourages his customers to take responsibility for their medicines by asking him about anything they are unsure of.

### Don't be shy!

Kevin is a pharmacist in a small country town. He believes many of his customers don't ask him questions about their medicine because they think he is too busy to be bothered. 'But, even though we are often busy, we are happy to be asked questions', he said. Your pharmacist may provide many services that you don't know about, or have advice that could be useful to you. 'We're here to help', says Kevin, 'but sometimes the only way we'll know you need help is if you ask for it'. ◆



Kevin holds up a computer print-out called Consumer Medicine Information (CMI) which provides details of the medicine he is dispensing. He often gives his customers a copy of a CMI so that they understand everything about the medicines they are taking.

# Getting more information about your medicine

**Consumer Medicine Information (CMI) is a series of easy-to-understand information brochures about specific medicines written especially for you, the consumer.**

CMI's answer many of the common questions you may have about the medicine you take. CMI's are provided in two ways: as a print-out from a pharmacist's or doctor's computer; or directly from the manufacturer as an insert in the medicine pack or carton.

Ask your pharmacist or doctor for a CMI brochure – they can check whether there is one available for the particular medicine you are taking. There are already CMI's available for more than 800 medicines, including some over-the-counter items. Eventually CMI's will be available for all prescription medicines, as well as for some non-prescription medicines you can only get from a pharmacist. CMI's are intended to answer your questions and provide information. If you have any questions or are concerned after reading the CMI, talk to your doctor or pharmacist. ♦

**Medicines can play a significant role in the development of dental disease. Dental disease can impact on a person's life in the same way as other diseases of the body. High-risk groups for dental disease include people who are older, who live in rural and remote areas and indigenous Australians.**

Medicines that contain sugar or high acid levels can cause tooth decay, as can medicines with a side effect of reducing saliva. 'Teeth smart' medicines are sugar-free and non-acidic. Ask your doctor or pharmacist if the medicine you've been prescribed is 'teeth smart'. If it isn't, ask if there's an alternative. If a 'teeth smart' medicine is not available, advise your dental professional so a preventative program can be established. ♦

## Stored medicines can be dangerous

Do not keep medicines that you do not need. As your doctor or pharmacist will tell you, stockpiling and sharing of prescription medicines is wasteful and can be dangerous:

- If unnecessary quantities of powerful medicines are stored at home, family members, especially children, may be at risk of poisoning.
- You may be tempted to change the way in which you use your prescribed medicines without seeking appropriate advice or monitoring from your doctor or pharmacist. Only your doctor can decide what dosage is best for you.
- If you offer your powerful, left-over medicines to friends or relatives, that medicine will probably be inappropriate, may cause serious side effects and could interact dangerously with other medicines they may be taking.
- You may become confused or even sick as a result of misinformation if the labels of stored medicines are no longer appropriate, or are hard to read.
- Some medicines lose their effect or even become toxic after their use-by date.

It may save you a few dollars to reuse old medicine but it may also cause you some real harm. Talk to your pharmacist about disposing of unused medicines safely.



## Dental disease & medicines

# The Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme

Most medicines available on prescription are subsidised under the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme (PBS), so just by having your prescription filled you receive the benefit of the subsidy.

General patients pay a maximum of \$20.60\* towards the cost of each PBS medicine while concession card holders need only pay \$3.30\* towards the cost of each PBS medicine. The Commonwealth Government pays the rest.

## (PBS)

### THE SAFETY NET

If you and your family need a lot of medicines in any year, there is a PBS Safety Net to help protect you financially.

To be eligible for the Safety Net, you need to keep a record of your spending on PBS medicines.

#### A family can include:

- A spouse or de facto spouse;
- Children under 16 in your care; and
- Full-time dependent students under 25.

## Saving money with the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme

Jill's health is not the best. She has a chronic condition which limits how much she can work. Although this condition can be controlled by medication, the ongoing expense of her medicine is something she could happily do without. So Jill was very pleased when she heard about the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme (PBS), through which the Government subsidises the cost of some of her medicines. Because she is on a low income, Jill qualifies for a concession card. This means that she gets PBS medicines at a reduced rate. The PBS Safety Net threshold means that after she's spent \$171.66\* on medicine in the calendar year, the rest of the PBS medicines she needs to buy that year are free. Jill keeps a Prescription Record Form so that she knows when she has reached the Safety Net threshold.

\*As at January 2000.

If you visit the same pharmacy, your pharmacist will be able to keep a computer record of your spending.

If you use different pharmacies, including public hospital pharmacies, ask for a Prescription Record Form for community pharmacies and if required, a separate one for hospitals.





## **SAFETY NET THRESHOLD**

### *General patients*

When you have a record of spending \$631.20\* on PBS medicines for yourself and your family in a calendar year, ask your pharmacist for a Safety Net Concession Card. This entitles you to further PBS medicines for only \$3.30\*\* for each prescription for the rest of the calendar year.

### *Concession card holders*

When you and your family have a record of spending \$171.60\* on PBS medicines in a calendar year, ask your pharmacist for a Safety Net Entitlement Card. This entitles you to further PBS medicines free\* for the rest of the calendar year.

## **HOW TO SAVE MONEY ON PBS PRESCRIPTIONS**

Some brands of medicines cost more than others. For example, Alphamox, Amoxil, Moxacin, and Cilamox are different brands of one antibiotic (amoxycillin) in the same amounts but their prices may vary.

**TO AVOID PAYING EXTRA, YOU CAN ASK YOUR DOCTOR TO PRESCRIBE THE CHEAPEST BRAND, OR YOUR PHARMACIST MAY BE ABLE TO SUBSTITUTE A LESS EXPENSIVE BRAND.**

**IF YOU USE HIGHER PRICED MEDICINES TO TREAT HIGH BLOOD PRESSURE, CHOLESTEROL, PEPTIC ULCERS OR REFLUX YOU COULD ALSO PAY EXTRA.**

If you choose the more expensive brand you will need to pay the difference between your brand and the lowest priced one. The extra you pay does not count towards the Safety Net.

If you do not want to pay more, your doctor may be able to prescribe cheaper medicines that work just as well and safely. The pharmacist cannot substitute other medicines if the doctor marks the prescription 'no substitution'.

The extra cost does not count towards the Safety Net and is not recorded on your Prescription Record Form.

For more information about PBS:

Phone (free call) 1800 020 613

Email [hic.info@hic.gov.au](mailto:hic.info@hic.gov.au)

Internet site [www.hic.gov.au](http://www.hic.gov.au)

\* These figures are adjusted annually and do not include alternative medicines or the surcharge for brand or therapeutic group premiums.

\*\*As at January 2000. ♦





# Improve *your* lifestyle

**Although medicines can make you better if you become sick, it is preferable to avoid getting sick in the first place if possible. Many illnesses are the result of poor lifestyle habits. To stay healthy you need to eat well, sleep well, get regular exercise, not smoke and avoid stress!**

## HEALTHY SLEEPING

Everyone needs sleep, but we all need different amounts. There are lots of things you can try at home to improve your sleep. Not all of them will work for you, but some may help. Try these suggestions before you try any sleeping medicines. If you still have problems, see your doctor.

- Wind down before bedtime by listening to music or reading.
- Establish a sleep routine where you do the same things in the same order before going to bed.
- Learn how to use a relaxation technique.
- Think of your bed as a place for sleeping. Don't watch TV or read in bed. If you are unable to sleep, get up and do something in another room until you feel ready to sleep.
- Make sure your bedroom is dark enough, quiet enough and at a comfortable temperature.
- Start taking gentle, regular exercise such as a daily walk.
- A hot bath before bedtime can help you get off to sleep.
- Avoid tea, coffee and other caffeine drinks before bedtime.
- Don't eat a heavy meal just before bedtime.

- Avoid having pets in the bedroom – they can disturb your sleep by moving around or wanting to be let out.
- Don't be afraid of missing one or two night's sleep. Worrying about insomnia will only make it worse.

## TIPS FOR MANAGING STRESS

Your lifestyle directly affects your emotional wellbeing.

**EATING WELL AND  
TAKING REGULAR  
EXERCISE MAKES YOU  
FEEL BETTER PHYSICALLY  
AND RELIEVES STRESS.**



Other ways to relieve stress could be to share your concerns with someone or use relaxation techniques (and not just when you are tense). Go to stress management or relaxation classes.

Medicines have improved the quality of our lives, but there are also other ways to improve your life and manage any medical problems. ♦

## Need more information?

For more copies of this brochure call the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme Information Line on Freecall 1800 020 613.

An interpreter service is available on request.

More information about the cost of medicines and the PBS Safety Net can also be obtained from the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme Information Line on 1800 020 613.

For more information about publications produced by the Department, visit our web site at [www.health.gov.au](http://www.health.gov.au), or call 1800 020 103. For further health information, visit the Health*Insite* web site at [www.healthinsite.gov.au](http://www.healthinsite.gov.au).



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