

Raise Your Prescription IQ

By William H. Thomas, M.D.

Even the most medicine-savvy person can pick up a few tricks, tips and tactics to help make wise choices, cut pill bills – maybe save a life. These true-or-false questions are just what the doctor ordered.

When you open your bottle of prescription drugs, you are in charge of your health – not your doctor. The risks you run and the benefits you reap depend greatly on what you know about your medications, or your Prescription IQ. Drug-smart patients know the pills they take are life-enhancing yet potentially dangerous. In my geriatrics practice, I've seen hundreds of patients whose health has suffered from side effects, drug interactions or simply taking too many medicines. Sometimes these problems are a nuisance. Sometimes they end lives. How smart are you? These questions test your knowledge.

True or False? **You don't need to keep a list of the medications you take, because your doctor has that information.**

FALSE:- Don't assume that doctors and hospitals have up-to-date information about you. Healthcare professionals do their best to be accurate, but you'd be surprised how easily errors can creep into your medical chart. Each time you visit a doctor or hospital, bring along an up-to-date list that includes:

- DOCTORS:- The names and phone numbers of all the doctors you're seeing.
- DIAGNOSES:- Your current and past conditions.
- MEDICATIONS:- Include the names and dosages of everything you take; don't skip over-the-counter drugs, herbal remedies and vitamins.
- HEALTH EVENTS:- Give dates and descriptions of key hospitalizations, surgeries, medical procedures, etc.

True or False? **After a medication is prescribed for a serious illness, it's dangerous to ever decrease the dosage or stop taking it.**

FALSE:- When I speak to doctors, I often ask if anyone remembers attending a med school lecture on the art of tapering medications. Typically no one raises a hand. Modern medical education pays very little attention to how to safely discontinue drugs. This is a tragic oversight, because continuing medications past their effectiveness is expensive and dangerous. Ask your physician: "Are the medications I am taking still necessary?" Help your doctor provide good care by letting him or her know you understand that more is not always better.

True or False? **You should keep medicine where it belongs: in the medicine cabinet.**

FALSE:- To preserve their power, medications should be stored in a cool, dry place. That rules out the medicine cabinet; bathrooms are among the moistest rooms in a house. A kitchen cabinet is better, but your best bet is a dresser drawer. Just use the childproof cap if

the grandkids are around. According to the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission, one-third of the accidental prescription drug poisonings in children involve a grandparent's pills.

Another good idea is to use pill sorters to help keep track of medications. These small plastic trays can hold a week's worth of medication, slip easily into a purse or bag, and provide visual evidence of which doses already have been taken.

True or False? Savvy consumers dispose of outdated medications by flushing them down the toilet.

FALSE:- It's a good idea to get rid of old medicines, because prescription drugs are chemical compounds that break down over time. But flushing them is not the best option. Researchers are finding traces of prescription drugs in some public water supplies. The amounts are tiny, but the consequences could be huge.

A better option: Take your old pills back to the pharmacy – most pharmacies accept the return of outdated drugs.

True or False? Some side effects mimic signs of aging.

TRUE:- If you're suffering anything from memory loss to erectile dysfunction, don't just blame it on Father Time. Certain conditions are chalked up to "normal aging" when they're actually side effects from medications. Tell your doctor if something is not right, and do some research of your own. Sure, you never read the flimsy package inserts that accompany your medications – the print is tiny, and they're about as easy to understand as an income tax form – but your pharmacist can provide you with more readable and useful medication guides. You also can learn more about the side effects of specific medications on the Web, at www.fda.gov. The consumer information is current and accurate.

True or False? Lifestyle changes are less effective than drugs in improving long-term health.

FALSE:- Healthful eating habits, regular moderate exercise and weight loss are all linked to increases in strength, endurance, improved sleep and a better overall sense of well-being. Next time you pop the top on your medicine bottle, ask yourself whether a new commitment to diet and exercise might be part of the answer to your health issues. For example, weight loss, exercise and salt reduction can lower high blood pressure, and eating less saturated fat but more vegetables can lower cholesterol.

As a doctor, I can tell you that some people will need to take medications no matter how much they exercise and how closely they watch their diet. But many more people can reduce the number of pills they take by embracing healthful food, fresh air and exercise.

And it's never too late to start: A study that followed more than 7,500 women ages 65 or older found that those who had been inactive, but took up exercise, had a 48% lower risk of death from any cause during the 12 years of the study than those who stayed sedentary.

True or False? Prescription drugs are tested on people of all ages before they receive FDA approval.

FALSE:- Few research trials include older people. As a result, doctors often have little

information on how older people may respond to a particular medication. It's a critical issue because older people metabolize medications differently from healthy young adults. When prescribing medication to an older patient, my philosophy is "start low and go slow." If you start taking a new medicine, ask to begin at a reduced dose and make changes gradually. Doing so can protect you from unpleasant and dangerous side effects.

True or False? **You can safely save money by splitting tablets at home.**

TRUE:- Sometimes you actually can buy two pills for the price of one. For example, my local pharmacist tells me Zoloft costs \$2.87 for a 50mg pill – and a 100mg pill is the same price. So people taking 50mg of Zoloft a day could buy the 100mg tablets, break them in half with a plastic pill splitter (which costs about \$4) and save \$43.05 a month. If you take 10mg of Lipitor a day, you could buy the 20mg strength, split the pills and save \$1.87 a day, a 28% discount adding up to \$56.10 a month.

Not every drug can be chopped in half: Capsules cannot be split, and some tablets (mostly long-acting ones or those that are coated to pass intact through your stomach) should not be split either. Ask your doctor or pharmacist about each medication you take before splitting pills, and be sure to follow that advice.

True or False? **Herbal remedies and dietary supplements rarely have side effects; that's why they don't require a prescription.**

FALSE:- Herbs and dietary supplements are prescription-free as long as they don't claim to treat specific medical conditions. That's why packages tend to make vague promises such as "Prostate Health!" or "More Energy!" or "Lose Weight!"

Not only can these remedies have serious side effects, but they also can interact with prescription drugs. Some examples: Ginkgo can affect the body's response to anticoagulants or anti-platelet agents, while saw palmetto can increase the effects of estrogen.

It's always best to ask your doctor or pharmacist about possible inter-actions before trying an herbal remedy.

True or False? **The new Medicare prescription benefit law provides the same coverage to all regardless of income.**

FALSE:- This year, low-income beneficiaries can apply for a Medicare discount card and receive a \$600 credit for drugs. Check online at medicare.gov for eligibility information. Next year, the discount card program and the "direct subsidy" both end. But people with the lowest incomes will pay no premiums or deductibles, will pay small or no co-payments, and will have no coverage gap. Slightly higher incomes will have a reduced deductible; some will have a sliding-scale premium.

True or False? **Brand-name medications are more expensive than generic because they are more effective.**

FALSE:- The FDA guarantees that every generic medication works exactly the same as its brand-name equivalent. The only real difference is price. Generic cost an average of 20% to 40% less than their brand-name counterparts. Drug companies spend millions of dollars

emphasizing the size, shape and color of their drugs. But it's what's inside the pill that counts, so ask if a generic form is available.

True or False? Drugs that have been on the market for years can be as effective as new ones – and may be safer.

TRUE:- Older and more established medications can be a wise choice for several reasons. First, they have a well-established track record, so you are unlikely to get a nasty Vioxx-style surprise when you open the morning paper. Older drugs often cost much less, because the original patent has run out and they are available in generic form. In some cases, older medications have been shown to outperform new drugs in head-to-head comparisons. Don't assume that newer automatically means better.

True or False? People taking six or more daily medications are more likely to have a negative drug interaction.

TRUE:- Wayne Anderson, dean of the State University of New York School of Pharmacy, notes that patients who take at least six drugs a day have an 80% chance of experiencing a negative drug-drug interaction. Even more alarmingly, about 7,000 people die from medication errors each year – about 16% more deaths than occur from work-related injuries.

While some people have medical conditions that require the use of complicated drug regimens, it's best to use the fewest medications possible. Prescription drugs are double-edged swords and always must be handled with care.

Here's an example of one drug-drug interaction to be wary of: People taking cholesterol-lowering statins should not use antibiotics related to erythromycin; that combination can cause dangerously high blood levels of the statin drug as well as muscle soreness.

Florida East Coast PPSG Editor's Note:- When I saw this article and thought it would be a good one for the newsletter, I also thought it would be a good idea to show it to a pharmacist friend of mine to see if the article read true. My friend told me it did but to remind everyone that they should always check with their doctors before taking any new over-the-counter drugs, and also to make sure that their medications don't interact with each other. She also said that if you go to the Google search engine on your computer and put the name of the drug in, you can get a lot of information.

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