Taking Many Medications

Diabetes often goes hand-in-hand with other medical problems. Besides your diabetes medications, you may be taking medications for kidney disease, high cholesterol, or high blood pressure. Many people need three or more medications to get their blood pressure under control. Use of more than one medication to treat type 2 diabetes is becoming common, too. It’s easy to be overwhelmed by so many medications.

Problems That Can Occur
Several problems can occur when you take many medications:
- They may interact.
- You may have side effects.
- You may have an overdose because two providers prescribe the same medication or medications in the same family.
- You may not be able to afford them.
- You may forget to take them or renew them.

The tips below can help.

Stay Safe
To avoid medications that interact or are from the same family, both you and your health care providers should know all the medications you take and what they are for.

Everyone who takes medicines should make a list of them and carry it at all times. This list should include for each medication:
- Its generic and brand names
- Its dose and how often you take it
- What it is for
- Who prescribed it
- When you started taking it

Also put on your list the supplements and over-the-counter medicines you take. These include vitamins, pain relievers, herbal products, laxatives, and food supplements.

Knowing both the generic and the brand name is vital. Some medications have many brand names. You need to know all the names to be sure that two doctors haven’t prescribed the same medication.

When you go to any health care provider, take your list. Put all your current medicine containers in a bag and take that, too.

If your provider wants to prescribe a new medication, ask whether it is safe to take with your current medicines. When you fill a new prescription, ask your pharmacist the same question.

Fill all your prescriptions at the same pharmacy if you can. Get to know your pharmacist and discuss with him or her your concerns about the medications you are taking.

Take your medications as prescribed. If you don’t, they may not have the desired effect. Be honest with your provider if you sometimes forget or skip doses. Otherwise, your provider may think the medication isn’t working well for you. He or she may then increase your dose or add another medication, making your “medication burden” even heavier.

Once a year, review your treatment goals and medications with your primary care provider. Do you still need all
your medications? Do the doses need adjustment? How about your daily schedule for taking your medications? Have any medications stopped working or started causing side effects? Can your regimen be made less expensive or easier to take?

Afford Your Medications
Health care providers do not always know the cost of the medications they prescribe. If you cannot afford your medicines, speak up! Your providers can help you, but only if they know there’s a problem. For example:

- Some drugs are available in less expensive generic forms.
- Sometimes, an older, less expensive medication can be used instead of a newer more expensive one.
- Some medications can be bought more economically in a larger dose and cut in half.
- Your provider may have free samples.
- Your provider can help you apply to a drug company’s prescription assistance program.

- Improving your diet, being more active, and making other behavior changes can sometimes cut the amount of medications you need for certain problems, such as high blood pressure, diabetes, and high cholesterol.

Remember To Take Your Medications
Your medications do you no good if you do not take them. If you often forget, talk to your doctor. He or she may be able to change your dosing schedule or switch you to a long-acting once-a-day form. The less often you need to take medications, the less likely you are to miss a dose.

Know why you need each medication and what will happen if you don’t take it. You may then be less inclined to “forget” a medication on purpose.

Setting up a routine helps a lot:

- Make taking your medications a habit. Take your medications at the same times and in the same place each day.
- Link medication taking to daily routines, such as at mealtimes, at bedtime, or when brushing your teeth. Check with your pharmacist for the best time of day to take any given medication if you aren’t sure.
- Use kitchen timers or a multi-alarm watch to alert you that it’s time for your medications.
- If your health care provider approves, get a week-long medication organizer with three or four compartments for each day. Once a week, refill the organizer.
- Keep a wall calendar. Each time you renew prescriptions, write it on the calendar. Also mark the day you need to renew again.
- Renew prescriptions at regular intervals. Then, if you forget to renew on time or an emergency comes up, you still have enough on hand.