

Understanding the side effects of medicines



About side effects

Side effects are unwanted effects you may experience while taking a medicine. Sometimes they are serious, but most of the time they are not.

Side effects may occur when taking any medicine, including both prescription and non-prescription medicines. Non-prescription medicines include:

- those you buy over-the-counter in a pharmacy or supermarket
- complementary medicines, including herbal and 'natural' medicines, vitamins and minerals.

How common side effects can be

To explain the chance of getting a particular side effect, information supplied with most medicines uses the terms *common*, *uncommon*, *rare* and *very rare*.

<i>Common</i>	up to 1 in 10 people
<i>Uncommon</i>	up to 1 in 100 people
<i>Rare</i>	up to 1 in 1,000 people
<i>Very rare</i>	up to 1 in 10,000 people

Another way of thinking about the chance of a side effect is this: if the risk of a side effect is 1 person in 100—an uncommon side effect—then 99 of those 100 people are unlikely to get the side effect.

What to do if you get a side effect

If you experience a side effect that worries you, get advice from a health professional. If taken correctly, medicines will help most people improve their medical condition. Only a few people experience unwanted effects.

If you experience a side effect that seriously affects your health, thinking, or ability to work, you may need to stop taking your medicine immediately and go to hospital. You may need urgent medical attention.

In an emergency, call 000 and ask for an ambulance.

Weigh the risks and benefits

Before you start to use any new medicine, ask a health professional for advice.

This may be your doctor, pharmacist, dentist or complementary health practitioner. If this person has advised you to use a medicine, they have weighed the risks of unwanted side effects and the expected benefits of treatment. They will have considered things like your health and family history.

If you are concerned about the side effects of a medicine, ask a health professional:

- **what are the benefits they expect the medicine to have?**
- **how often do people get side effects when taking the medicine?**
- **how serious can the side effects be?**
- **what are the risks of not taking the medicine?**

Some side effects may sound serious, but you need to weigh these against the medicine's expected benefits, as well as the risks of not using the medicine. For example, common side effects of some anti-cancer medicines include severe vomiting, tiredness and complete hair-loss, but most people with cancer choose to accept these side effects rather than do without the medicine.

Get information on your medicine

Before you start using a medicine, get information about it by:

- **asking a health professional**
- **reading the label of non-prescription medicines**
The label has all the information on how to use the medicine—and when not to use it.
- **reading the Consumer Medicine Information (CMI)**
CMIs are available free of charge for all prescription medicines and some non-prescription medicines. They contain information on the medicine, including possible side effects and what to do about them. If you do not get a CMI with your medicine, ask your pharmacist to print one for you.
- **calling Medicines Line**
Call **1300 888 763** between 9am and 6pm Eastern Standard Time.

Find out:

- **what side effects are possible**
- **what action to take if a side effect happens**
- **how soon to act if a side effects happens.**

Make sure all relevant people have this information. This could be your carers, the people you live with or your children's school teachers.

Reduce the chance of side effects

Keep a list of all the medicines you are taking.

Include both non-prescription and prescription medicines.

Before your doctor or dentist prescribes you a new prescription medicine, tell them all the other medicines you are taking.

Before you choose a new non-prescription medicine, check the label or ask your pharmacist whether you can use the medicine.

If you are taking several medicines, find out whether they can be used at the same time.
Some medicines can interact and make you sick. Adding a new medicine may also reduce the effectiveness of the other medicines you are taking.

For all medicines, take the dose recommended by your doctor or written on the medicine label.

Check if there are things you need to do when taking the medicine, such as:

- taking the medicine with or without food
- taking it at particular times or days
- avoiding certain foods or alcohol
- having regular check-ups to monitor the medicine's effects
- not driving
- avoiding recreational and illicit drugs.

When side effects can happen

Side effects depend on:

- the medicine
- your medical condition and general health
- what other medicines you are using at the same time.

Some side effects can happen soon after you start taking the medicine. You may not notice other side effects for weeks or months.

Side effects are most common when you start to take a medicine or increase the dose. This is because your body is adjusting to the medicine. These types of side effects usually pass within a few days or weeks and you will be able to keep taking the medicine without further problems.

Some side effects may not go away completely. You will need to weigh the benefits of taking the medicine against the side effects.

Before changing or stopping your medicines, ask a health professional for advice.

Reporting side effects

To help improve medicines, researchers need to know about any side effects you experience.

If you get a side effect, tell a health professional.

They will pass this information to the relevant Australian Government authority.

If you want to report a side effect yourself:

- call the Adverse Medicine Events Line on 1300 134 237 (local call)
- get a 'Blue Card' to report the problem from www.tga.gov.au/adr/bluecard.htm
- contact the medicine's manufacturer—their name and address are on the medicine's label.

More information about medicines and health

- **Medicines Line on 1300 888 763** between 9am and 6pm Eastern Standard Time
- **www.nps.org.au** website of the National Prescribing Service, which provides information and services on Quality Use of Medicines
- **www.healthinsite.gov.au** gives information on important health topics.