



Got a Pharmacist?

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By Christina Elston



If you're like me, you are counting the days until Daylight Savings Time comes to an end and we can all "fall back" and start our mornings with a little sunlight. But along with setting our clocks back one hour on November 1, pharmacist John O'Brien, Pharm.D., has another job for us all.

"Whenever you change your clock, you should have a conversation with your pharmacist," says the professor at College of Notre Dame. What to talk about?

1. Tell the pharmacist what medications you are taking.
2. Ask whether you should still be taking them.
3. Ask whether there are less-expensive options available. The patent might have expired on your brand-name prescription drug, meaning a cheaper generic version is available.

Don't know any pharmacists? Not sure how to find one?

"Everybody should have a personal pharmacist," insists O'Brien, who says that you can start your search by asking to see the pharmacist next time you have a prescription filled. (In other words, when the person behind the counter at the drug store asks if you have any questions for the pharmacist, you answer: "Yes, I do.") When the pharmacist comes to the counter, here's what you ask:

"Why am I being prescribed this medication?"

"What will the medication do to treat or manage my health problem?"

"What happens if I don't take it?"

After you get your answers, explain that you are looking for a personal pharmacist to help your family use your medications properly. She or he should be happy to help. "This is what every pharmacist went

to school for,” says O’Brien. “They want to do this.” But if you get a chilly reception, don’t be shy. Keep looking until you find someone who will look you in the eye and answer your questions.

Why all this talk of medications? Because the average American last year filled 12 prescriptions. ([Listen to an interesting story on prescription meds from NPR here.](#)) But as a pharmacist, O’Brien doesn’t necessarily think that’s a bad thing. Because many of these medications can be used to successfully manage chronic conditions like high blood pressure, high cholesterol, diabetes and asthma, and keep them from turning into something worse – like a heart attack or stroke. And used properly, these drugs don’t just save lives, they save money. “The good news is that prescription drugs are the best value in healthcare,” O’Brien says.

But “properly” is the key. And if people don’t take the time to find out what their medications are for, how and when to take them, and what could happen if they don’t, they’re less likely to take them as prescribed. O’Brien says he’s definitely heard from patients who take their blood pressure medication when their blood pressure “feels high,” instead of their prescribed daily dose, or people who simply forget to take their medicines. “That’s how a \$50 asthma inhaler becomes a \$25,000 hospital admission,” he explains.

This becomes even more complicated if you’re trying to keep track of medications for an older member of your family, like your parents, who might not live in the same house – and is much more likely to be on multiple medications. In this case, along with getting cozy with your pharmacist, O’Brien suggests following up with your parents after all doctor’s appointments to see how they are doing and ask about any medications they might have been prescribed.

He says the older generation, more used to medications you take to “fix” a problem than to prevent one, are less inclined to take preventive meds on schedule, and more likely to wait for something to act up first.

One way to get your pharmaceutical act together is to create a Personal Medication Record for everyone in your family. This is where you list all the medications – both prescription and over-the-counter – that you take, when you started taking them and what you take them for. You can download a form from the AARP (even if you’re not a senior). [Just click here.](#) This will make visits with your new friend the pharmacist even more fruitful.

And if you are trying to make sure your parents, grandparents, great aunts and uncles, or other long-lived loved ones are taking their pills on time, and you’ve got a few bucks to spend, O’Brien recommends a little device called MedSmart. It’s a medication reminder device that does everything but pour you a glass of water. Load it up with the proper medications, and at the right time, the device sounds an alarm, flashes, and makes one dose of the meds available. Miss a dose, and it can send e-mail, voice mail and text messages to the person taking the medications and their caregivers to let them know. And it even lets you know when it needs a refill.



That kind of peace of mind will cost you around \$99.99 up front, plus \$35 per month for “event reporting services.” But O’Brien envisions a not-too-distant future where pharmaceutical companies provide the devices free to patients to help them take their meds on schedule. “That’s part of a 21st century healthcare system,” says O’Brien, “using technology to make better health easier.” You can find out more about MedSmart at HealthyAgingSolutions.com.