


## “Behind the scenes” with your pharmacist

 When you take a prescription to the pharmacy, you may have to wait for a period of time until it is ready. You are probably anxious to get home and may not realize just what your pharmacist is doing for you during that time. Here's a look at what your pharmacist typically does to make sure the medicine is safe and right for you.

**Clarify your prescription.** Sometimes doctors accidentally leave out important information or their writing may make it hard for the pharmacist to understand your prescription. In these cases, your pharmacist calls your doctor before filling your prescription.

**Enter your information.** Once the prescription is clear, the pharmacist enters the information into a computer so there will be a complete record of all the medicines you take.

**Check your history.** Your pharmacist then looks at all the medicines you take (including non-prescription medicines you have told your pharmacist about). This is to make sure you have not been given prescriptions for more than one medicine that serves the same purpose. This sometimes happens if you visit several doctors who don't know what each has prescribed for you. The pharmacist may need to call your doctors so that you do not buy or take unnecessary medicines or take too much medicine.

**Look for interactions.** Your pharmacist makes sure that the new medicine is safe to take with other medicines you

are taking. For example, the antibiotic **Bactrim (sulfamethoxazole and trimethoprim)** increases the action of blood thinners such as **warfarin (Coumadin)**, which could lead to bleeding. Your pharmacist also checks if the effect of the medicine could be changed by diseases you have, or by what you eat and drink. For instance, the pharmacist may need to call your doctor if the medicine prescribed for your stuffy nose is not recommended because you have high blood pressure. Your pharmacist may also need to put stickers on your prescription vial that tell you what foods or drinks to avoid while taking the medicine.

**Check allergies.** As long as you have told your pharmacist about your allergies, he or she checks whether you are allergic to the medicine. This can be tricky because some medicines have different ingredients and you might be allergic to just one; other medicines are known to cause an allergic reaction if you are allergic to a similar medicine.

**Verify safety and effectiveness.** Your pharmacist checks your prescription by verifying the dose and how long it should be taken. All medicines have recommended doses and specific conditions they treat. If your dose is different from this, or if the medicine is not commonly used to treat your condition, the pharmacist may need to call your doctor for more information. Your pharmacist may recommend a different dose or medicine to your

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## 60-second

### safety tip

■ **Hello...my name is...** When you are admitted to a hospital or seen at a clinic, you are usually given an identification (ID) bracelet to wear. This bracelet lists your name, your birth date, and usually at least one other number. Some hospitals use other bracelets to signal important information like allergies. Nurses must check these bracelets before giving you any medicine to confirm you are the right patient and to make sure you are not allergic to the medicine. But what if your bracelets are hidden? A mother wrote us about her son's surgery to remove his tonsils. Before surgery, his ID bracelet and his latex allergy bracelet had been placed on his right wrist. When the child came out of surgery, his mother noticed that his intravenous (IV) line had also been put into his right hand. Since he was a child, the nurses had also placed a soft board under his hand and taped it to his wrist. This was done to keep the IV safe and to prevent the child from pulling out the IV. However, the board and tape covered both the ID and the allergy bracelets. The mother didn't want to upset the nurses and, unfortunately, did not bring the hidden bracelets to their attention. Luckily, there was no latex used for treating the boy and he did not receive the wrong medicine. Always make sure nurses and other hospital workers can and do check your bracelets (or the bracelets of a loved one). It's one of the last checks that can protect you from a mistake!

**NATURALLY SPEAKING**



**Error at a health food store.**

An elderly woman developed diarrhea after taking antibiotics for an infection. Her doctor suggested eating yogurt, but she didn't like the taste. Her doctor then gave her a prescription for **Lactinex** (*Lactobacillus acidophilus* and *L. bulgaricus*). He told her to get this at a health food store. **Lactinex** is a harmless dried bacteria used to replace bad bacteria in the digestive tract that cause diarrhea. The woman went to the health food store and gave the clerk the prescription from the doctor. The clerk found the product and told the woman to take 7 capsules before each meal and at bedtime—a total of 28 pills each day!

The prescription actually said to take 1 capsule four times a day. However, the doctor had written the number 1 in a particularly unsafe style for prescrip-

tions, with a bar and dot over a vertical slash mark (†). Thus, the number 1 looked like the number 7. The woman took 28 capsules the first day. By the next day she had severe nausea, vomiting, and diarrhea, worse than before. She was hospitalized for 24 hours.

If you take a prescription to a health food store, remember that the sales clerks have no knowledge or training to read and interpret prescriptions. So ask your doctor to go over the directions with you. For safety reasons, it would be best to purchase non-prescription products from a pharmacy if possible. This helps your pharmacist know about all medicines you are taking, even those that don't require a prescription. Pharmacists are also highly trained to read prescriptions and assess the safety of medicines based on your specific conditions.

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doctor. Pharmacists can give a “second opinion” about medicines.

**Work with your insurer.** If you have insurance for prescription medicines, your pharmacist files a claim with your company to get approval for payment. This may take some time, especially if you have changes in your insurance coverage or a new insurance company.

**Double-check the prescription.** Before your medicine is ready for you, the pharmacist rechecks the label on your prescription and compares it to what the doctor has prescribed. He or she then checks the contents of the bottle or package and compares it to the supply used to fill your prescription to make sure it's the right medicine.

The computer used in the pharmacy often has high-tech software programs to help your pharmacist complete each of these steps. This, along with your highly educated pharmacist, helps to ensure your safety and health. You can contribute to your own safety by allowing your pharmacist the time necessary to complete each of the above functions without distraction. Whenever possible, drop your prescriptions off in the morning and pick them up later in the day. Or, call the pharmacy a day ahead of time for refills. Making sure your medicines are safe and effective takes time.

Adapted with permission from *How Your Pharmacist Fills Your Prescription*, accessed on the American Pharmacists Association website at: <http://www.aphanet.org/AM/Template.cfm?Section=Search&template=/CM/HTMLDisplay.cfm&ContentID=3548>.

**In The News!**

In 2003, the US Congress directed the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services to establish a committee to study medication safety. This July, the committee released its report, [Preventing Medication Errors](#), which confirmed that mistakes with medicines happen as often as once each day for a hospitalized patient. Luckily, most mistakes are not harmful. Those that are harmful can be prevented. As a result, the committee made many recommendations to reduce the risk of mistakes with medicines.

Most of the recommendations are for doctors, nurses, and pharmacists, but some of the recommendations are for consumers. For instance, the report says the most important thing consumers can do is to maintain an up-to-date medication list. A form that can be used for this can be found on the ISMP website at: [www.ismp.org/Newsletters/consumer/alerts/ISMP\\_Med\\_Form\\_PDF.pdf](http://www.ismp.org/Newsletters/consumer/alerts/ISMP_Med_Form_PDF.pdf).

- The committee also recommends changes to help all Americans use medicines safely, including:
- A government-sponsored patient bill of rights
  - Easier-to-read leaflets about your medicine (what your pharmacy gives you with your prescription)
  - Reliable information about medicines for you on the Internet through the [National Library of Medicine](#)
  - A national hotline open around the clock for questions about medicines (staffed by nurses and pharmacists)
  - Better electronic health records.

The full report is available at: <http://darwin.nap.edu/books/0309101476/html>.

Contact Information



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