

# VETERANS'

*healthy living*

*Creating an Environment of Caring for Mental Health Inpatients*

**Medication Safety in 3 Simple Steps**

**Patient Safety Residency Program: Teaching Doctors with Safety in Mind**

**Incident Reporting System Will Speed Resolution, Increase Prevention Measures**



**VA HEALTH CARE**

Defining **EXCELLENCE** in the 21st Century



# Dear Veterans

## A Message from the Network Director

Michael F. Mayo-Smith, M.D., M.P.H.  
Network Director



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**On the Cover:**  
Springtime at VISN 1.

We are finally seeing signs of spring after what seemed like a very long, cold winter season! With that in mind, we are excited to bring you a fresh line-up of informative articles that we hope will keep you safe—both in VA facilities and at home.

The article on page 3 explains how patient safety played a major role in the design and functionality of White River Junction VA Medical Center's newly renovated mental health unit.

Page 4 addresses the use, storage, and disposal of your medications and includes three simple steps to help keep you safe when it comes to over-the-counter and prescription medicines.

Patient safety is a top priority among our staff. As explained on page 5, the VA Patient Safety Medical Resident Program was created for medical residents and medical students, giving them a new awareness of ways to keep Veterans safe while in our care.

Page 6 presents a startling fact about falls: they are the second leading cause of accidental death for Americans after traffic collisions! We hope that after you read the article, you will evaluate your surroundings with fresh insight.

Finally, page 7 explains a new electronic Incident Reporting System at the VA Medical Center in White River Junction that was designed to speed up reporting and resolving unsafe situations in our facilities.

We hope this issue helps you enjoy a safe transition into spring.

Thank you for your service. Now let us serve you!

Michael F. Mayo-Smith, M.D., M.P.H.  
Network Director





# Medication Safety in 3 Simple Steps

Over-the-counter (OTC) and prescription medications are an important part of your health, especially if you rely on them for chronic conditions such as diabetes. When you are hospitalized, VA processes ensure that staff members administer the right medication at the right time in the right quantity. But what about medication safety at home?



## 1. Your healthcare team needs to know your medication history.

With VA's digital recordkeeping, healthcare providers can easily view your records to see what prescription drugs you take. But you must also tell them what OTC medications you use, including vitamins, minerals, and pain relievers.

Acetaminophen, for example, which is the main ingredient in Tylenol products, is found in more than 600 different over-the-counter and prescription medicines. So you may be consuming acetaminophen in an OTC product *and* getting it through a prescription drug. To avoid this scenario, tell your healthcare provider and pharmacist about **all** OTC products you use.

## 2. Whether you take prescription drugs daily or only occasionally for an illness or injury, it is important that you understand what you are taking, how to store it and take it, and why it was prescribed.

Read any printed instructions that accompany your medication, and don't hesitate to ask your pharmacist questions.

Store all medications—even OTC cough and cold products—in a safe place, preferably in a locked cabinet, and keep track of how much medicine is left. Children and adults commonly abuse OTC and prescription medications.

## 3. Dispose of unused or expired medications properly.

Never flush them down the toilet or drain, as they can harm fish, wildlife, and public drinking supply waters. Instead, ask your VA pharmacist how to dispose of them safely. Many communities now offer a drug take-back program. If not, follow these simple steps to dispose of unwanted drugs.

- Keep prescriptions in the original container, which can help identify the contents if accidentally ingested.
- Mark out your name and prescription number on the label.
- Add water or soda to pills to start dissolving them. Mix pills or liquid drugs with something you cannot eat, like cat litter or dirt.
- Close the lid and secure with duct or packing tape.
- Place the bottle inside a non-see-through container like a coffee can, and tape that container closed.
- Dispose of the container in the trash—not in a recycle bin.

### VA's Pharmacy Benefits Management Service also recommends the following:

- ✓ **DO** keep medications in the original container, out of sight and reach of children and pets.
- ✓ **DO** dispose of medication that has passed the expiration date.
- ✓ **DO** store medications that need to be refrigerated where children cannot easily reach them.
- ✗ **DON'T** give your medications to others or take someone else's medications.
- ✗ **DON'T** put different medications into one bottle.
- ✗ **DON'T** take a medication that looks different (i.e., color, shape, size) than you are accustomed to without first checking with your pharmacist.



## Tips to Keep Your Feet Firmly Planted

Every year, falls send almost 9 million people to emergency rooms and result in about 25,000 deaths!<sup>1</sup> In fact, you have probably fallen or you know someone who has. People of all ages fall—and it is usually preventable! (*How many of the following hazards are present in **your** home?*)

Common causes of falls include wet flooring or spills on floors or other walking surfaces. Dry products like dust, powder, or granules can also cause an accident, and highly polished or freshly waxed flooring is slick even when dry.

Uneven surfaces or a change of surface, such as carpet to vinyl, can be tricky, as can loose rugs or mats. Outdoors, weather conditions like rain or ice are hazardous, but so are leaves and plant debris, mud, gravel, and uneven terrain. Indoors and out, many accidents happen when people trip over an obstacle in their path—a garden hose, a box, an electrical cord, or even a frisky pet!

We are more prone to slips, trips, and falls as we age, but people of all ages can fall due to the effects of fatigue, stress, medications, or alcohol. Similarly, anyone can fall from carrying too heavy or too cumbersome an object, lack of attention to surroundings, or simply being in too big of a hurry!

Inside, keep frequently used items in easily accessible areas. If that isn't possible, stand on a sturdy stepstool instead of a chair or table to extend your reach. Obviously, a job that requires climbing, such as painting, or roof or gutter repair, requires using the right type of equipment (ladder, scaffold, etc.), understanding how to use it properly, and avoiding the temptation to stretch outside your comfort zone.

<sup>1</sup>National Safety Council

<sup>2</sup>National Institutes of Health

Other preventative measures include checking your home inside and out for poorly lit walkways, damaged steps (or stairways), and missing handrails. Keep walkways clean, dry, and clear of clutter and cords, and use only non-skid rugs or mats. Also, don't underestimate the importance of footwear that fits well and offers good traction.

Injuries from a fall can be minor, ranging from bumps and bruises to a sore muscle to a broken arm or leg. But falls can cause lost wages, disability, and reduced quality of life. In fact, falls are the second leading cause of accidental death for Americans after traffic collisions.<sup>2</sup> Be informed and be safe!

To learn more about how to prevent a fall, visit the Veterans Health Library information at [http://www.veteranshealthlibrary.org/Encyclopedia/142,89339\\_VA](http://www.veteranshealthlibrary.org/Encyclopedia/142,89339_VA).



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